



Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: The role of the GEO: embedding equalities across Government, HC 1139

Wednesday 14 April 2021

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[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Caroline Nokes (Chair); Ben Bradley; Angela Crawley; Alex Davies-Jones; Kim Johnson; Kate Osborne; Bell Ribeiro-Addy; Nicola Richards.

Questions 1 - 24

Witnesses

I: Dr Wanda Wyporska, Executive Director, The Equality Trust; Tansy Hutchinson, Head of Policy, Equally Ours; Tim Durrant, Associate Director, Institute of Government; Justine Greening, former Minister for Women and Equalities, and Co-Founder, Social Mobility Pledge.

I: Baroness Falkner of Margravine, Chair, Equality and Human Rights Commission; Melanie Field OBE, Executive Director, Equality and Human Rights Commission.

Written evidence from witnesses:

[Equally Ours](#)



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Wanda Wyporska, Tansy Hutchinson, Tim Durrant and Justine Greening.

Chair: Welcome to this afternoon's meeting of the Women and Equalities Select Committee and the evidence session in our inquiry into the role of the Government Equalities Office, embedding equalities across Government. Can I start by welcoming our witnesses and thanking them for coming to give evidence this afternoon? We have Dr Wanda Wyporska, Tim Durrant, Tansy Hutchinson and Justine Greening. The first set of questions this afternoon will come from Kim Johnson.

Q1 **Kim Johnson:** Panellists, thank you and welcome. My first question is to Tansy. The GEO and the Equality Hub's move into the Cabinet Office has been broadly welcomed. What benefits do you hope the move will bring, and have any benefits been realised yet?

Tansy Hutchinson: It is a good opening question. As you say, it is a move that was broadly welcomed. For the Government Equalities Office and more broadly the Equality Hub, having a permanent home in the Cabinet Office met a lot of the things that both civil society and this Committee were seeking to achieve. It gives them a central point within Government. It means that they are not tied into the policies of one particular Department. It has the really significant advantage that no longer is the Government Equalities Office a nomadic Department, moving from one Department to another, with the associated disruption in terms of personnel, budgets and all the rest of it.

In terms of how many of those benefits have been achieved in practice, it is early days in many ways. The move happened before a period of significant political turmoil. It happened before a general election. We then had the move of the Government Equalities Office, the creation of the Equality Hub while that was bedding in, the move of the Disability Unit and other kinds of reorganisations. In many ways, that is still bedding in.

We would hope that, in the longer term, it enables maintaining permanent relationships and the creation of a more coherent and permanent system of engagement with civil society, which can lead to much, much greater co-production and collaboration on putting forward the equalities agenda. In many ways, it is quite early days in that.

Given that period of turmoil, the movements and the fact that we had a general election, a lot of those relationships fell away, and we have spent the last year rebuilding them. That has been a challenge, particularly for us as a pan-equality organisation, perhaps more of a challenge than those focused on particular single issues. We have spent quite some time rebuilding those. As an organisation, we have good relationships but we would like to see something more structured and more permanent in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

place. I will leave it there. I am sure other questions will delve into the details of it.

Dr Wyporska: It is really important that the Social Mobility Commission is also coming into this group. We know about the intersections between protected characteristics and the economic system in terms of outcomes, even if we just look at the gender pay gap, the ethnicity pay gap, the disability pay gap and educational outcomes. We need to make sure that we are layering on the different levels and factors that can influence inequality and equality.

Q2 **Kim Johnson:** How will moving a policy area into the Cabinet Office give it more influence across Government? Can you give any examples where this has been successful?

Tim Durrant: The point about having any policy area in the Cabinet Office is that the Cabinet Office is the centre of Government. It sits literally in the middle of Whitehall and is a way to convene all Departments that are working on a set of issues. As Tansy said, previously the GEO was this nomad moving around whichever Department the Secretary of State responsible for it was in charge of. Setting it in the Cabinet Office means it is part of the convening and cross-Government structures that the Cabinet Office has the benefit of.

I have an example of things that work well when they are done out of the Cabinet Office, and an example of something that did not work well when it was not done in the Cabinet Office. On the first one, we have seen that Alok Sharma as COP president is a Cabinet Office Minister. He gave up his role as BEIS Secretary of State to focus full time on the climate change conference. Climate change, like equalities, is an issue that cuts across all the different policy areas in Government. It cuts through departmental silos, so having that run from the centre is pretty sensible in my view.

An area that did not work as well is another area that cuts across lots of Government: Brexit. When Theresa May set up the Brexit Department, it put Brexit off to one side and meant that the Brexit Secretary was not able to influence across Government in the way that someone in the Cabinet Office might have been able to. Also, given the disagreements in the early days over what Brexit should look like, officials in the Brexit Department were getting different instructions from officials in other Departments.

If it was in the Cabinet Office, you would have senior ministers like the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Prime Minister, ultimately, able to really set the agenda from the centre. Then that is pushed out across the rest of Government. There are a lot of benefits for this move, and it is the right thing to have done.

Q3 **Kim Johnson:** Thanks for providing those two examples where it has worked and not worked. It is proposed to move the Equality Hub up north. Will this impact on its ability to co-ordinate effectively across



Whitehall Departments?

Justine Greening: Thanks for having me here to give evidence. It makes sense to move the GEO into the Cabinet Office. I agree with the evidence that has already been given, but in the end equalities needs to be driven by the Prime Minister and across Government, and that needs leadership. We should be clear that, unless GEO and the equality agenda have a wider strategy, which for me is fundamentally around levelling up, you have part of the solution in the recent move and putting everything together in one place. Wanda is right about intersectionality and the fact that a lot of these issues combine, but it is one part of how we tackle this.

In relation to the potential relocation and move of roles up north, as you put it, it can absolutely work. I do not see why it would not. It is about time that this is a Government that reflected the whole country, and that obviously starts with the Civil Service. But, if all that happens with those jobs is that a whole load of civil servants who perhaps lived in outer London or Surrey and used to commute into Waterloo now move up to York and commute into Darlington, that is probably not the diversity we were looking for in terms of that move.

It is about making sure that these overall moves actually have impact in terms of the policy, motivation and effort that then translates across Government into what is an absolutely crucial agenda. Levelling up is fundamentally about inequality of opportunity, and inequality of opportunity is the result of the inequalities that GEO focuses on.

Kim Johnson: It might mean more new jobs up north, then.

Tim Durrant: I agree with everything Justine said on that specific point. The first question when we talk about these moves has to be, "What are the objectives?" If it is about recruiting civil servants from wherever the organisation is moving to in the north, the Department needs to think about, "What are the skills we need? What is the experience we need? Are we sure that the labour market in that particular area can provide those skills and experience?"

If it is about trying to bring in more views from across the country, I completely agree that makes sense, but fundamentally, if the Minister making the decisions on policy is still in London, as Justine said, a lot of this has to come from ministerial and ultimately prime ministerial leadership. If those senior Ministers are still in London and are making decisions based on the world they are in, and the people writing the advice are 200 miles north, there is no direct cause and effect in changing the outcome of those ministerial decisions.

As a cautionary point, these moves can work if the Government are clear on what their objectives are, but as people have said already, with any move, there is always scope for disruption. It takes time for an organisation to rebuild itself in a new place. When the ONS moved to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Newport in 2005, 90% of its staff left at that point because they did not want to make the move. There is a question about how you manage the transition in any move as well.

Q4 **Kim Johnson:** In 2018, the Women and Equalities Committee recommended the establishment of an equalities Cabinet committee to develop a written equalities strategy. Is this the best way to drive and scrutinise a cross-Government equalities agenda, or should other options be considered?

Tim Durrant: The strength of the Cabinet committee depends on the people on it, particularly the chair. A committee in and of itself is not going to be enough. If this is going to be chaired by the Minister for Women and Equalities, if that person wants to convene it regularly and use it to drive progress across Government, it absolutely can be a force for change. Going back to climate change, the PM set up a climate change sub-committee of Cabinet early last year with a lot of fanfare, but it has only met twice in the intervening 12 months. The creation of a committee and driving work across Government are not one and the same thing.

Justine Greening: That is not enough. If you are really going to get change, the Equalities Hub has to drive levelling up across Government through Cabinet Office. It should be asking each Department to publish a clear levelling-up action plan of what the Department is doing and how policy aligns to deliver levelling up and this equalities agenda that it effectively represents. It should have metrics by which it can measure progress. The Committee that should monitor that is called Cabinet, and the chair of that committee is the Prime Minister. It needs Cabinet focus to make sure that every single Government Department is delivering on a levelling-up agenda.

The role of the Equality Hub is to ensure that that work is orchestrated effectively across Government, and the role of this Select Committee can then be to scrutinise those Government Department levelling-up action plans to understand whether they are truly adequate, not just in terms of whether they are levelling up places, but whether they are going to level up people and the different groups within our society that have additional barriers, which stop them from getting on in life and making the most of their potential.

Dr Wyporska: I am sure this will come up in later discussion, but it is really important that we are thinking about whether we are talking about equality of opportunity here, as Justine mentioned, or equality of outcome. We need to be very aware of what we have in scope.

Q5 **Kim Johnson:** The Equality and Human Rights Commission has called for an inter-ministerial group on equality, chaired by the Minister for Women and Equalities. Could an inter-ministerial group provide similar benefits to a Cabinet committee?



Tim Durrant: I will give a similar answer to last time: in theory, absolutely. As others have said, this issue has to be about leadership. If the issue is prioritised, things will happen. If it is not, they will not. Brexit is another good comparator. There were a lot of inter-ministerial groups set up on detailed aspects of Brexit during the 2016 to 2019 period. They definitely created a lot of work across Whitehall. There were lots of papers flying around in advance of those meetings. There were lots of discussions, which will have been helpful in preparing for the various negotiation outcomes, but that was because it was a political priority. That prioritisation has to be the defining characteristic here.

Tansy Hutchinson: A cross-Government equalities strategy is something for which we have been calling for a long time. That ultimately has to be the mechanism that whatever system and structure is in place is designed to support. A robust strategy needs action plans and outcomes. We would quite like to see those outcomes linked into the obligations under the public sector equality duty, so that there is a level of accountability.

Whether that is done as a Cabinet committee or as an inter-ministerial working group, the key thing is that that structure has a job to do. That job needs to be set out clearly; it needs to be public and transparent; and it needs to be done with the involvement of civil society as a really key partner, not simply a stakeholder in this area. Later, I am sure we will come to the equality data programme that the Government Equalities Office is taking forward in the Equality Hub. That is going to be important, but engagement with civil society is also going to be a really key part of turning any of the results of that data into practical actions that can actually make a difference.

On a similar note, I just wanted to come back to the question about the location. Again, we are reasonably agnostic about where civil servants are placed. What we would like to see, if this move is made and people from the Equality Hub with that expertise and that connection back into central government are in different parts of the country, is that we make the most of that, use it look at the opportunity to broaden engagement with civil society and look at different initiatives that are happening in different areas. For example, my colleague Wanda can talk about the work of piloting the voluntary adoption of the socioeconomic duty. That is happening in different parts of the country. There are opportunities that can be taken from that.

As Justine said, if it is simply about moving where people live, and then we all phone in on the same Zoom call and it is all the same people on the same Zoom call, it is not going to achieve what is being sought.

Q6 **Kim Johnson:** The GEO has not published a strategic plan since July 2019, and the Equality Hub has not published any corporate documents since it was established in April 2019. How concerned should we be about a lack of strategic vision for equalities?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tim Durrant: Other panellists will have more to say on the specifics of the equalities strategy, but you cannot hold any part of Government accountable to what it is going to do unless it says what it is going to do. We are all going to be looking forward to that. At the spending review last year, there was this change from single departmental plans to outcome plans, and I believe those are going to be published later this year. We will be looking to see how the equalities issue features in the Cabinet Office's outcome plan, but until we see that it is very hard to assess.

Justine Greening: You are not going to get anywhere if you have no plan about where you want to go or why. It is crucial that there is a strategy. In a sense, Government need to stop seeing equalities as a niche issue that sits in whichever Department; now it is in Cabinet Office. This agenda underpins the entire Government strategy on delivering levelling up. We will not deliver levelling up unless we tackle those inequalities that hold people back, whether it is their gender, their sexuality, their race, the place where they are growing up or their background. All these issues are crucial and they are complex.

If the Equalities Hub and the Cabinet Office are going to have impact on this across Government, they need to have a clear architecture of these levelling-up goals that can break down that broader problem, and then understand the component parts of it that they need to take action on. The big risk is that you end up with a fragmented approach and a series of ad hoc programmes, which do not fit together as a whole. That whole-system change is going to be the best way that we can tackle the inequalities we all want to see addressed.

Q7 **Kim Johnson:** You are quite right: actions sometimes speak louder than words. Some stakeholders note the lack of clear rationale for including some equality issues, such as women's equality and LGBT issues, in the Equality Hub's remit but omitting others. Tansy, can you let us know what you think on that point?

Tansy Hutchinson: I agree with that as an assessment. The way the Equality Hub came about seemed to have been somewhat fragmented, and that is playing out in practice. I imagine that the ultimate aim will be that there is a more coherent system, but as far as I can tell that does not yet seem to include any aims to embrace the other groups that sit elsewhere. We can see it with work around age discrimination, where the focus remains within the Department for Work and Pensions. It remains on workers. It remains on employee programmes and suchlike, rather than ageism and age discrimination, which are underpinning the disadvantages that that group faces. The only place we can see it within the Equality Hub is under the legislation, and that is a fairly narrowly drawn role. At the moment, it is quite fragmented.

With the new departmental plan, I would like to see a coherent vision for what the Equality Hub wants to achieve and do. I would like to see that include those other groups that are talked about. As a minimum, we



HOUSE OF COMMONS

should be starting with those under the Equality Act, but that is a minimum. The role of the Equality Hub needs to be about looking at issues of discrimination, disadvantage and inequality, and how they can be tackled, in terms of not just the individual protected characteristics and the direct discrimination model that we see in the Equality Act, but where those inequalities are at a social level.

That is where the opportunity comes in of having the Social Mobility Commission and bringing in socioeconomic disadvantage, because you can then have actions that look at the realities of people's lives. To do that, not only do you need that inclusion of the broad sector in a pan-equalities approach, rather than each siloed issue having its own particular project, but you need more overarching objectives around that and more overarching outcomes that are being met.

They need to be placed in strategic positions within Government. We need that to be happening at the level of the Budget. We need it to be happening, critically at the moment, in terms of planning for disaster responses. The national risk register ironically sits in the Cabinet Office, but we have seen no role of the equality unit within that. To achieve that, it needs to be more than just the sum of its parts, and when those parts are incomplete it is going to have real difficulty getting there.

To come back on the point about what we want to achieve, we have to keep that goal in mind. It is about social change. It is about looking at society, looking at where the inequalities are, using data, using evidence, working with civil society to identify those priorities, and coming up with effective action to deal with them. For example, I recently saw an announcement on the Government equalities website about a piece of work, which was significant enough to warrant an announcement with the Minister's name attached, around getting flexible working advertisement commitments from a major recruitment website. That feels both useful and a good piece of work, but also quite unambitious, perhaps.

You would like to see an organisation and a Minister that cut across the whole of Government, perhaps aiming to incorporate that kind of action into the industrial strategy, into the funding being provided around the levelling-up agenda, into a whole range of different areas, to truly embed it. It is that kind of ambition that we would like to see.

Q8 **Kim Johnson:** Is the GEO or Equality Hub equipped to handle complex or balanced rights? What should the GEO's role be in supporting Departments when these issues arise, for example those recently experienced at Batley Grammar School?

Justine Greening: One of the challenges is that it is complex, as an agenda, and therefore the danger is that you end up tackling these discrete elements of it. As Tansy alludes to, the danger is that you just do one small bit of the challenge and miss the bigger picture. If you really want to get societal change, which is effectively what we are talking about, and create a fairer version of Britain, you need to have more of a



system change. The reason my answer to an earlier question was that this needs to be owned by Cabinet more than a Cabinet sub-committee is that there is always a danger that a smaller team, which is what the Equalities Hub and GEO are, will not have that heft to be able to drive change across Government.

There needs to be consideration as to whether you have somebody at Secretary of State level responsible for driving levelling up and equalities across Government, possibly from and through Cabinet Office, if that is not going to be something that the Prime Minister themselves can focus on day to day, due to other pressures.

Dr Wyporska: To underline the importance of having a pan-equality and economic approach, and the problem with fragmentation, the evidence shows that, in countries with high levels of income inequality, we also have higher levels of poorer educational attainment. We have higher levels of violent crime, poor mental health, poor physical health, drug and alcohol addiction, and a range of socially determined ills. We know that, if we do not approach this by looking at the whole of inequality, at how the different areas intersect and at the economics, we are doomed to carry on working in silos.

It is really welcome to have a much wider and broader approach to look at all those intersections, because, as Justine says, this is a complex issue. We have seen from Covid just how important it is to look not only at the health inequalities, but the environments in which people are living and the labour market in which they are having to operate.

Q9 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you. That is a very important point. Are there lessons to be learned from the GEO's handling of the balanced rights involved in Gender Recognition Act reform?

Tansy Hutchinson: This is a broader comment than specifically that, on the point about handling of potentially controversial issues. It reiterates this point about why having relationships with civil society, and with those who are both from and representing the groups affected by discrimination, disadvantage and inequality, is so important. It means that, when these kinds of issues arise, and when balancing and difficult dialogue is needed, regardless of the issue, there are systems and relationships in place, and there is trust in place, to be able to have those and take them forward.

It is not specifically about the particular issues around gender recognition, but it is a broader lesson. There is a real willingness, certainly among officials, to build and have those relationships. We have had a very constructive relationship, both since I have been in post and since the creation of the organisation. That has fallen away at points throughout time, and having that more consistently throughout, and as a core aim and function of that equality unit, is perhaps a lesson to be learned.



Q10 Ben Bradley: I wanted to focus on some of the socioeconomic factors that have been touched on during that first set of questions. This is split into three parts. I will start with the Equality Hub. Tansy, you mentioned that the Social Mobility Commission has recently moved into the hub. You talked about wanting to bring in socioeconomic and geographical factors as an important element of that. What are the advantages and disadvantages of that move?

Tansy Hutchinson: In terms of the advantages that we set out in the written response we gave, the reality of people's lives is complex. The reality of discrimination and disadvantage is complex. Once you move away from a very narrow understanding of discrimination in which one person discriminates against another, the direct discrimination model that is protected against under the Equality Act, you start needing to get into a lot more of the complexities of people's lives, in order to do the kind of levelling up, equalities agenda and social change that is needed if we are going to avoid things like the impact that the pandemic has had on our society. It is not just about particular groups; it is about us all, as we have seen with the pandemic.

The real advantage to having the Social Mobility Commission and its secretariat moving into the Equality Hub is that it enables that structural analysis of where the systemic problems and barriers are that need to be addressed if we are going to look at responding to the realities of inequality within society. That is a definite advantage. We get down to the realities, the nuts and bolts of people's lives, and get to policy, hopefully, that will have a real impact on that and real outcomes.

It is not so much a disadvantage, but a potential risk, which we are very aware of as a pan-equalities organisation, is that you wind up taking a very generic approach. You need to balance looking holistically at people's lives with identifying the disadvantages that particular groups face. For example, alongside advocating for a broad equality strategy, we advocate for a race equality strategy and a disability strategy. We would want to see issues of socioeconomic status, and the analysis, built into those. I will leave it there, because I am sure others have something to say on this.

Q11 Ben Bradley: If I could chuck in a second part to that question, what are the resource implications of this move and of including socioeconomic and geographic inequality, which has been the Minister's phraseology, in terms of what they are adding in with the Social Mobility Commission? What is that going to cost? What does that mean in terms of manpower and funding within that Department?

Justine Greening: On the wider point around this issue of place and socioeconomic background, it really does matter. It patently matters, and it certainly matters from a levelling-up perspective. The key to unlocking progress on this is having a common framework within which we look at what is driving these inequalities. For example, Ben, levelling up in terms of what needs to be addressed in a place like rural Lincolnshire will be



HOUSE OF COMMONS

very different to the kinds of challenges maybe faced in your community, which might be very different, again, from what communities might need in central Manchester.

The key is being able to look at it through a common lens. With the Social Mobility Pledge, one of the reasons why we came up with the levelling-up goals was to have that common framework, whether it was inequalities that grew in the education system, inequalities around access to employment and then progression, or inequalities in relation to the things in life that either help or hinder us, whether it is health, housing or, increasingly, digital access. All those ingredients are either things that are there, in which case we get on with life, or things that are not there, in which case it is much harder. Some communities in particular are affected by many of them, in comparison to others.

Fundamentally, this is an issue about, if I can put it like this, two competing operating systems for Britain. One operating system is our traditional one, which has too often and for too many areas prioritised connections over competence. It has been exclusive as a way of operating. The operating system that is compatible with levelling up is a country where efforts and reward are linked, and that same relationship is there for everyone, whoever they are, whatever their background, wherever they are growing up. It is not about a back-scratching version of Britain, where if you know the right person, and you have the right conversations, you can get the rewards. That is a very important thing from my perspective that we need to recognise. We have the wrong operating system and we need to switch on to the right operating system.

In relation to resources, where you put GEO, and whether or not socioeconomic inequality is part of it, is almost less important than having a pan-Government strategy on delivering levelling up with the resourcing to go with it. Bear in mind that this is not just about throwing money at a challenge, but about making the structural changes that are necessary in order to allow levelling up to happen. In other words, I am saying that, if it is the wrong operating system, you cannot buy your way out of that. At some stage, we will have to confront the wider reforms that will mean it is a much fairer version of Britain, and people growing up in your community have every bit as much chance to make a success of their lives as those growing up in different places with far better connections and far better starts.

We should not be surprised that, when lives do not start fair, they do not end fair. That is fundamentally something that we should be looking to address through this work. The Equality Hub really ought to be at the centre of driving change.

Dr Wyporska: I agree with some of what Justine has just said. I recognise that, in essence, it is the structural changes that are needed. We cannot keep tinkering at the edges, because we have been doing this



HOUSE OF COMMONS

for decades and things are not getting any better for most of the people in this country, unfortunately. To echo the point that inequality affects all of us, even those who are at the top are still suffering in a country that has very high levels of inequality, such as the UK.

What are the problems? For example, if we look at the UK, socioeconomic status is a predictor of your future to a range of about 50%, as opposed to Nordic countries, where it is about 25%. That model of social mobility is very, very stagnated here. There is a danger in the social mobility narrative, which says that we pluck the poor but bright kids out, we are able to give some people opportunities, and that leaves behind the others.

We need to be very careful about the narrative of social mobility that we are using, because we want to ensure that everybody has the opportunities to reach their potential. That is why my approach is not one of equality of opportunity, because we can give everybody the same opportunity, but they do not all have the cultural capital, the education, the geography and all those other aspects to reach that opportunity. We need to take an equity approach, which says that, if we need to put extra measures in place for people to reach that equality of outcome, this is the approach that we need to take. We have a model for that. We do that in terms of disability. We are able to do that there.

There is a danger in the social mobility narrative that we really need to impact, because it also continues the narrative of meritocracy, that if you just work hard enough you will be fine. Well, there are people up and down this country who are working very hard in two or three jobs, and they are not doing fine. They are on pitiful wages and they are trying to make ends meet. We have to look at those wider structural issues, which include the economy, which include wages, and which very often, as we know from the evidence, come back down to income.

Q12 Ben Bradley: That leads me neatly on to the next section. I listened to what you said there. I agree with some of it. In terms of equality of opportunity, to me that is about offering interventions so that everybody can equally take advantages of opportunities where they find them and where we present them, as opposed to equality of outcome, which I would not see as being as desirable.

It brings me neatly on to the next part, which is about the socioeconomic duty in the Act. I have read through some of the written evidence around it. I will start with the opening question, I suppose, before I throw the devil's advocate element into it. I will come straight back to you, Wanda. A lot of evidence to our inquiry has proposed enacting the Act. It is something that you have supported in written evidence. What impact do you think that would have in terms of disadvantaged communities?

Dr Wyporska: The socioeconomic duty is, as the Prime Minister might say, an oven-ready solution. It is already on the statute books. It could be commenced very quickly, and it would signal and provide that motor



HOUSE OF COMMONS

and driver for public bodies, and then others, to take into account the effect of their actions on those who are socially and economically disadvantaged. It provides a very important marker in the sand to say, “We are looking at socioeconomic disadvantage and we are factoring that into the policies we are producing, as well as the implementation”.

As you know, this has been introduced in Scotland. It was recently introduced in Wales on 31 March. I am sure the EHRC will speak about its findings later. We have seen, from councils that have voluntarily adopted this Act, that it has provided a lens through which they are looking at their policies and implementing a range of issues. For example, in Wales, a council introduced a recycling of school uniforms project. It means that there is that focus within councils, because very often the focus is on poverty alone rather than looking at inequality. We know from the past 40, 50 or more years that we have not solved poverty. By many measures, poverty is increasing, so we need to take a different approach.

Justine Greening: In a sense, I wish it was as easy as just changing a regulation. That might be part of the solution, but in the end there is a very cultural aspect of the need for levelling up to happen and why it does not happen. The public sector duty is not obviously one that will necessarily be reflected with what companies do. This is therefore much more fundamental than just having a duty that we hope local authorities might deliver on effectively. We need to be much more ambitious.

For example, if the Government, as they are at the moment, are reworking their procurement policy—they have just done a consultation on a national policy statement on procurement—where do levelling up and tackling inequalities fit into that? We should be asking whether every person who is recruited and every pound that is spent is working as hard as possible to tackle levelling up and deliver on that. That should include socioeconomic and place-based inequalities that certain communities disproportionately experience.

Part of that can be relocating and putting some jobs out of Whitehall into very different parts of the country. Diversity is crucial in order to truly deliver on this levelling-up agenda that the Government have. Diversity works. Businesses that are more diverse take better decisions and perform better, so that can be a big part of it. I am sat in London right now, and there are young people growing up on the Alton Estate, just half a mile from where I am, who feel utterly disconnected from the opportunities that will still stay here, for example, in Government, even after some of those roles have headed up to places like Darlington.

We need to understand that, while levelling up is about places, it is also about people. That is why having this under the umbrella of the Equalities Hub can work, but you need systematic strategies to really drive change on the ground, which could be backed up by a regulation change like this, but it is not going to be enough to deliver the systematic change that this country needs.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

I strongly agree with Wanda. This is a national challenge for our country. It needs to be seen in the context of an international challenge on levelling up and on inequality that a number of developed countries face. We have the sustainable development goals for developing countries, predominantly. Our challenge as a developed country is inequality of opportunity. Wanda, I would term it in relation to not just access to opportunity, but the things that hold us back from accessing opportunity, whether that is bad housing, lack of digital access, poor education, not having a high-quality job anywhere near or being stuck in a dead-end job because the business I work for has not worked out how to train me, develop me or ever connect me up with a more challenging role in that organisation.

It is the whole thing that we now need to get to grips with. We can master that very complex challenge of levelling up, but it is going to take a pan-Government approach and a level of ambition that we have not seen from any Government of any colour in the past. Maybe this one can really rise to the challenge and make a difference. I certainly hope so.

Tansy Hutchinson: I wanted to come back to this question about the advantages of using the socioeconomic duty within the Equality Act. I do not disagree with anything that Justine has said. I would particularly advocate for things like building equality into procurement, and the point that every single pound spent should be harnessed towards these kinds of goals and levelling up.

Within that, we need to make sure that we do not forget the people within the places, and that that includes equality associated with the full range of reasons that people face disadvantage, whether that be socioeconomic status, racism, ableism or misogyny. All these things need to be a part of that. In terms of the advantages of using something like the socioeconomic duty within the Equality Act, not only is it there—and, as Wanda says, oven-ready—but it could be commenced tomorrow by very, very simple regulation. It is something people are familiar with. There are models of it being rolled out.

It is also not dependent upon the political whims of the time. That is something that we are really keen on. To come back to the starting point of this evidence session around the equality unit and the role of the Government Equalities Office, that new role needs to be well embedded as a central part of Government and their ambitious agenda, so being in every room where the procurement policies are being decided and saying, “This is what needs to be within this if we are going to meet our equality duties under the public sector equality duty and the socioeconomic duty”. They need to be within those rooms, robustly saying those things and being heard.

That should not depend on the political will at the time. That should be a part and parcel of good governance of a democracy, because equality is about us all and benefits us all. That is one of the advantages of using



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the existing legal framework, which was passed under one Government and has been implemented for many years under another. It is not a party-political thing at the moment, we hope, and there is huge consensus across society. We did polling last year that said the vast majority of people want Government action on inequality. They want Government action on this. This would be an important part of delivering on that.

Ben Bradley: I wonder if I can throw out a bit of a challenge on that conversation, and see what you make of it and who wants to volunteer a response. I agree with Justine that introducing it in itself does not fundamentally change anything for the most disadvantaged. It is more about what interventions you are putting in place and how you are structuring that across Government in terms of that structural change you mentioned, Justine.

The risk and the challenge of the socioeconomic element of the Act is that it embeds a certain approach. Wanda, in your discussion you mentioned the difference between equality of outcome and opportunity. At the time back in 2009, one Labour Cabinet Minister described it as “socialism in one clause”, and it seems to me to effectively embed equality of outcome into legislation rather than the opportunities discussion, which is an approach that asks, “How do we better help more disadvantaged people, for whatever reason, access and take advantage of opportunities?”, in a way that Justine was more focused on.

I wonder what your response is to that. Is equality of outcome really more desirable than equality of opportunity? Polly Toynbee said that this element of the Act had “mind-bogglingly immense implications” in terms of the way that we govern. Is that something we should really embed and restrict Government on for the long-term?

Dr Wyporska: I will take Justine’s lead on this about wanting a Government to be ambitious. In the current situation that we are in, when we have millions going to food banks, when we have over 4 million children in poverty, many of them in households with a working adult, our ambitions for equality of outcome at this point are the very basics of people having access to good-quality food, good-quality housing, good-quality public services and the things they need at that very basic level, in order to then go and take advantage of opportunities.

We do need both, because we need to be able to level up. Justine was talking about the concentration of power in the hands of the moneyed few who have the connections. We know that, disproportionately, those who are in the top jobs in media and the judiciary, even among your good selves in Parliament, in many areas of influence, have predominantly come from fee-paying schools. We know that there is this concentration of power. We have seen how that works in evidence over the last couple of days.



We need to have a more nuanced approach. We do need that equality of outcome, because ultimately we want everybody to be in a position where they can take advantage of the opportunity. We cannot jump to equality of opportunity straightaway, because we need to do that foundational work.

Q13 Ben Bradley: Why would you need to embed this into legislation in order to offer better services and better interventions for the most disadvantaged? Why does this bit of legislation matter?

Dr Wyporska: This piece of legislation is important because it sets out that public bodies—and this includes regulators, education and other public bodies, not just local councils—have to recognise and acknowledge that there are inequalities within the system and within their structures, and they have to look at how they manage those and how their decision-making has an impact.

There are those who say that, had this come into effect in 2010, when the legislation was brought in and when it was not commenced, it would have had a completely different outcome in terms of what cuts councils would have been able to make. Potentially, this would have played a very big part in legislation. I am with Justine. Again, this is tweaking at the edges. We need systemic and structural change, but, especially in the light of Covid and the increased multiple disadvantages that communities are facing, this is something that the Government can do right now.

Q14 Ben Bradley: I have just looked at the clock and realised that I am probably making a mess here, Chair. I will very quickly dive into my final question. Please be relatively brief, because I have overrun massively. With taking on this expanded remit in the Equality Hub, what will it need? What extra things will it need to be effective at delivering that? Are there examples of other organisations or other Government Departments that have tried things like this, where we could seek to emulate that kind of success?

Tim Durrant: I will be brief. In terms of specific resources, I am not sure I have a good answer to that. Thinking about other examples, again, I would come back to the climate change example and the preparation for the COP at the end of the year. When the UK won the right to host it, there was a unit set up in the Cabinet Office, which is driving the cross-Government preparations for that conference. As I understand it, it is pulling together input from Departments across Government. As I say, now that Alok Sharma is full time as COP president, it is supporting him, but that is obviously a one-off event that he is preparing for, rather than a long-term embedded set of policy priorities. It is not a direct equivalent but it is a good comparator.

Ben Bradley: Thanks, Tim. That is helpful.

Q15 Alex Davies-Jones: Thank you to our witnesses for joining us this afternoon. Justine, how effectively were you able to manage the



competing demands of being both Education Secretary and Minister for Women and Equalities?

Justine Greening: I felt it was fine, in the sense that, if you are a Secretary of State, you are hugely busy and you have to juggle those competing responsibilities, but I felt they went together. Education is fundamentally about levelling up and so is this wider equalities agenda. I felt I was able to get further more quickly, because they were both under my portfolio. I always said it was the best job I will ever have, because of the differences you could make.

That was my attitude. I cannot say how other people who have had that role feel about it. My observation is that I had a very clear idea of how important I felt, what I wanted to do, how it fitted with my wider brief and why that collective brief mattered as a whole. There is always a danger that, if it gets put into someone's brief where that wider brief is really not so much at all to do with being at the heart of delivering levelling up, for example, it pulls in different directions, but I never felt that it did. I would have always liked more hours in the day, probably to sleep, as much as anything.

Q16 Alex Davies-Jones: That was probably my next question. If you could give us more of your personal, first-hand experience of this, how much of your time was split between the two roles? Did you find any potential conflicts of interest or any competing demands on your time regarding both roles?

Justine Greening: It depended on what we were doing and when. There were times when the broader education brief was the heaviest thing in my inbox. There were other times when the equalities brief took more of my time, for example when we were putting in place the gender pay gap regulations. When we were finally and thankfully able to crack on, as I was determined we would do, with reforming relationships and sex education—it was the first time that had happened in 15 years or so—that was a really good example of where the two remits came together in a very positive way. Maybe, if the Equality Hub had been in a totally different place for education at that stage, it would have been a lot harder for us to crack on with what I felt was crucial.

There were always going to be competing demands. It is one of the reasons why I was saying earlier that having clear-cut priorities for Government is so important, because otherwise it just ends up being who shouts loudest. Different Departments will have different priorities, quite understandably. If you want a cross-Government approach to deliver a cross-Government national priority like levelling up, it has to be driven probably by Cabinet Office, probably by the Prime Minister, so that it is always at the top of every Department's agenda and is the lens through which every Department looks at how it is delivering policy.

If you are in DCMS, tackling the digital divide becomes crucial to delivering your levelling-up plan. If you are in BEIS, making sure that



every company has addressed the fact that there should not be a single dead-end job in this country that traps people in low pay should be at the heart of the levelling-up strategy you are delivering, alongside spreading opportunity. Of course, we know where education fits, but every single Department has a role to play. It is why every single Department should be tasked with coming up with a levelling-up action plan that it is getting on with. The Equality Hub should be at the heart of understanding whether those plans are being progressed and whether there are measurements against them that can help transparently tell us if we are moving in the right direction.

Q17 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Given that, given your experiences in being a previous post holder of this brief, and given the huge equalities issues that have been highlighted throughout the pandemic, should this ministerial post become a full-time Cabinet role, to ensure that the Equality Hub is embedded across every Government Department, so it has somebody championing and leading it?

Justine Greening: That is a sensible approach if it can be the right role. There should be a Secretary of State for levelling up who is driving this equalities agenda. Fundamentally, levelling up is an equalities agenda. It will take focus in order to make sure that pan-Government policy is orchestrated so that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

For me, one of the learnings that came out of my time in politics, and the time I spent in Government, is that Government find it hard to deliver complex long-term change. Therefore, they have to get better at co-ordinating pan-Government, generational change. We have seen how they have been able to make progress on doing that with climate change, but you almost have this people and planet agenda for Government now: net zero and levelling up. We have seen on climate change the importance of Government setting a framework, in a sense, that can then unlock progress and contributions from business and from civil society.

You need to also remember, and Government need to remember, that the actions of business and the private sector, and how that sits alongside the work of civil society, is also crucial in making sure that levelling up happens and that we tackle these inequalities. We know about statistics that ethnic minorities are doing, in many cases, better in our education system. The reality is that the world of work, apparently, is not as open to them. That is unacceptable in modern day Britain, and some of the answers to dealing with that lie with the decisions, the actions and the leadership of British business. The work I am doing on the Social Mobility Pledge is to make sure that those businesses are open to the very diverse talent this country has, and see opportunity much more strategically in terms of the impact that it can deliver to levelling up this country.

It is long overdue, but there is a lot of innovation going on and a lot of solutions out there already that can make a massive difference on changing things, without a single taxpayer pound being spent or a law



being passed. It is about values that we have as a country, and whether different organisations and institutions outside Government can reflect the ones that people have said they want to see taken forward for our country, which is a country where everyone has the same chances to get on in life.

Q18 Alex Davies-Jones: Tim, what are your thoughts? Should there be a full-time ministerial role in the Cabinet Office to push through the equalities agenda at the heart of Government?

Tim Durrant: It is a difficult question. I was thinking about this before the session. To come back to points that were made earlier, if this is going to be a priority for the Government, yes, absolutely, because giving someone the opportunity and time to do this full time is going to get more things done than if someone is doing it alongside their other role.

Obviously I defer to Justine on her experience of doing those roles. It is interesting that she mentioned how having been Education Secretary was very beneficial, because there is clear overlap between the equalities brief and education. It is currently Liz Truss, who has the international trade brief. That is quite a different brief. The Equalities Office and the equalities brief cut across the Department for Education, Treasury, DWP, MHCLG and the Home Office—many, many Departments—but the Department for International Trade is one of the few that are not on the list. That is an interesting pair of briefs that the Minister is combining.

If there were to be a full-time Minister doing this, they would need to be fully empowered. The benefit of having a Secretary of State doing this is that they sit at the Cabinet table, so they can hold their colleagues to account on what they are doing as well. If it is a more junior Minister who is full time on this, they are not at the top table, I suppose. You would want it to be a Secretary of State-level person who can attend Cabinet and who has the resources in terms of civil service support to push things across Government. The GEO, and the Equality Hub as a whole, does not hold that many leaders itself.

Alex Davies-Jones: We have that in the shadow Cabinet of the Opposition. It is something we would like to see.

Q19 Angela Crawley: It would be fair to say that, over the years, the equalities brief has had many different areas of responsibility and perhaps varying degrees of focus and attention, but can I welcome Justine back to the Committee? It is great to see your continued focus in this area.

Tansy, you mentioned earlier a point that I would like to address with Justine and Tim. The ministerial roles in the Equality Hub are fragmented across the Department for International Trade, the Department for Education, Treasury, DWP and the Cabinet Office. How can the Equality Hub operate effectively as a single entity, given this disparate ministerial structure?



Tim Durrant: I imagine Justine will have a lot more to contribute on this than I do. Joint Ministers per se are not a new thing. They have worked many times. There are lots of examples of joint offices between Departments. For example—I do not know if it is still around—the Office for Life Sciences was between BEIS and the Department of Health. I know at the moment there is the Office for Veterans' Affairs, which is a Cabinet Office and MoD body. They are tried and tested, and they do manage. They break down silos between Departments. They can get things done. As well as providing ministerial portfolio areas, they bring civil servants together who have experience in both of the relevant areas. That is worth mentioning.

The thing is that most joint ministerial roles combine two or sometimes three Departments or portfolios that are related. I was looking on GOV.UK. Chris Philp is a Home Office and Ministry of Justice Minister. Obviously there is crossover there. Lord Goldsmith works on international climate issues, and sits in the FCDO and Defra. You can see why these Ministers are in those two Departments. The issue with this one is that this is almost a second job that these Ministers have, rather than an expansion of one of their portfolios. It is difficult.

As you say, we have a Minister in the Treasury and the Department for Education. I imagine those are both pretty important Departments for making progress on the equalities agenda, but the equalities brief is not part of their day job. It is a separate question most of the time, so that is always going to be difficult, as to how they manage those two asks on their time.

Q20 **Angela Crawley:** It would be fair to say that it is impossible to imagine that you could give your primary focus to equalities if you were across various Departments. Justine, you will have a view, having been in this role for a period of time.

Justine Greening: I take a different view. It is part of the day-to-day job. This is a Government that have at their heart an ambition to level up Britain. That is about equalities, fundamentally. Therefore, if you are Secretary of State at the Ministry of Justice and dealing with the impact of lives that have often got off to the worst possible start, fundamentally, it is still about people who have potential and could get their lives back on track. Every Department has a contribution to make on this wider levelling-up and equalities agenda. In relation to how you make it happen, it needs organisation and a common architecture used across Government, which reflects that different Departments will intersect on to this levelling-up and equalities agenda in different places.

Education is the driving force for how we stop gaps opening up in younger people's lives, but not solely. There will be other Departments that have a role to play on that. As I have said, BEIS will perhaps take the primary lead on how to have that discussion and debate with business about open opportunity and fair progression, once young people and older people are in their careers. This can be done. It requires



HOUSE OF COMMONS

organisation, consistency and rigour, and it requires being driven by a Prime Minister role.

Fundamentally, if you have in place the right architecture, clear-cut plans that you are happy with, the metrics and the roadmaps to check and measure whether you are on track, and you know whether you are going forwards or backwards, through a prime ministerial role, you should be able to hold your individual Secretaries of State to account on that. At Cabinet level, there should be able to be that quite regular debate about whether, in general, the Government are playing their role in helping to level up this country.

It can be done. I am convinced about that. The Government have an unprecedented opportunity to make a change on the ground for millions of people's lives for the better. This is crucial for our society, our economy and the longer-term wellbeing of our democracy. Fundamentally, it has to be creating a country where everyone can achieve their potential. That is the promise of democracy. It is why we give everybody a vote. It is underpinned by an assumption that people have an equality and an equal voice because they have an equal worth. We should be aiming to transform this country so that people with those talents can have an equal chance to use them. For me, that is the fundamental inequality that we need to address.

Q21 **Angela Crawley:** I share your enthusiasm for this important area. From your point of view, specifically in your capacity in this role, how would you measure your success in a period of time? Give it three years or five years. How would you like to measure your success within this role in achieving those positive outcomes?

Justine Greening: Do you mean my own personal success, what I did, or how a person in the role would go about measuring that?

Q22 **Angela Crawley:** Ideally, it would be your point of view on it, because you cannot necessarily speak for others. What would you view as a successful outcome in this position, with your responsibilities in this current post?

Justine Greening: I was able to do the Education Minister and Minister for Women and Equalities role for over a year and a half. I would have obviously liked to do it for much, much longer. I absolutely loved that job. In that time, on the education side, we brought forward opportunity areas, which were, to the point Ben Bradley was making earlier, about place-based change and tackling socioeconomic disadvantage. We brought forward the first ever social mobility action plan for the Department for Education, which looked at that initial task of levelling up and how you stop those gaps opening up at earlier ages, for very small children and young people in our education system, and then, at that point, how they get connected into opportunities in the world of work.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Within the direct Minister for Women and Equalities role, I am delighted to say we passed the gender pay gap regulations, which I think will have long-term impact in the transparency they bring and perhaps give us a way forward on other areas in terms of the role transparency plays. We brought the two roles together when we did the relationships and sex education reforms, which I thought were crucial in tackling other areas of barriers that people find they have as they grow up that can hold them back.

I felt like I got a lot done. There was a huge amount more to be done, of course, but I hope that we were able to make a lot of progress. Maybe it is a good example that you can just crack on with things, rather than always feeling like you need to bring forward a Bill to get change. We did not do a Green Paper or a White Paper on opportunity areas or the social mobility action plan. We knew what we needed to do. It was about setting it out really clearly so that a wider world could get on with it. That is fundamentally what people want: for Government to get on with stuff and have change on the ground. They are not really interested in the laws so much as whether the laws change their lives for the better. That is what we should all be aiming to do.

Q23 Angela Crawley: I am just conscious about that point of getting on. I know we are already running over on time, so with the Chair's permission I will run together my next few questions. Tansy, welcome back to the Committee. Are the Ministers and officials located across the multiple Departments sufficiently accessible to all the equalities stakeholders?

Tansy Hutchinson: In terms of accessibility, it is so patchy, and it frequently depends on pre-existing relationships. This is why I come back to the broader point that I was making before, which is that we need a system of engagement with civil society on equality that is linked into specific objectives and outcomes, is accessible to everybody and does not rely on already knowing the way into a particular organisation. We have great relationships with many people within the civil service and within different Government Departments, and we are really glad of that. We certainly would not want to see any of that work rolled back.

We are talking about equality, opportunity and access. That has to apply to the ability to have relationships with Government as well. This is where the Equality Hub can play a really good role in opening up Government to much wider voices, including ours and our membership's, also so that we do not have to go around every Department and have the same conversation again and again.

This is something that I was thinking of as Justine was speaking, with this wonderful vision, which in many ways I share, about having these big structural changes. It is also why we need to keep coming back to equality and where this started from with the Equality Act. So often, it is about the basics, but the basics are not even got right. We are going around different Government Departments at the moment, and one of

the things I am doing on a frequent basis is talking basics: the basics of how you engage with civil society; basics around simple access needs.

British Sign Language interpretation has not been consistently used, either in political dialogue or in the resources that have been made available throughout the pandemic. We have member organisations that have resourced their own interpretation resources around vaccination programmes. How can that be right? We have raised this and have had an open ear from the officials concerned. This is not a criticism of them at all, but it is not happening across Government.

To take a small step back to the discussion before about having a permanent Minister, we absolutely want a full-time post, but it needs to be a post grounded in equality. It needs to not only have that vision, but have the basics there and get the basics right across Government.

Q24 **Angela Crawley:** I definitely support those comments and it is welcome to hear that. What changes could be made to the Equality Hub's ministerial structure and what benefits could be achieved?

Tim Durrant: I do not have much to add, other than what has been spoken about already in terms of the joint roles and combining them with other Departments. I would just reiterate that it is about the support that Ministers get. For example, do the Ministers have someone in their private office whose responsibility is the equalities brief? Is that person able to get the information they need from officials across the relevant Departments? If a Minister is focusing on the other side of their job, not having that support there to enable them to do both is going to make it even more difficult.

Chair: I am sorry, Wanda; we are going to have to move on to the next panel. I really appreciate the evidence that all of you have given. If there is anything you want to add in writing that you feel we have not covered, please do submit it to the Committee. It would be hugely appreciated.