

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: The role of the GEO: embedding equalities across Government, HC 133

Tuesday 25 May 2021

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Members present: Caroline Nokes (Chair); Elliot Colburn; Alex Davies-Jones; Kim Johnson; Kate Osborne; Bell Ribeiro-Addy; Nicola Richards.

Questions 46 - 109

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Elizabeth Truss MP, Minister for Women and Equalities, Government Equalities Office; Marcus Bell, Director, Equality Hub, Cabinet Office.



Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Elizabeth Truss and Marcus Bell.

Q46 **Chair:** Good afternoon and welcome to this afternoon's session of the Women and Equalities Select Committee and our inquiry into the role of the Government Equalities Office in embedding equalities across Government. This afternoon, as our witnesses we have the Secretary of State for International Trade and Minister for Women and Equalities, Liz Truss; and Marcus Bell, who is the director of the Equality Hub. Can I just kick off by thanking both of you for coming to give evidence this afternoon? I will give you the chance to give your statement, Liz. If you want to kick off with that, we will move into questions afterwards.

Elizabeth Truss: Since taking on this role, I have been determined to make sure that the Equality Hub takes on the bread-and-butter concerns of people up and down the country and the questions that keep them at night: "Is my town a safe and good place to live with good job prospects? Am I paid fairly? Will I be treated properly if I get pregnant?" These are the concerns that people have. We must make sure that everybody is treated fairly regardless of where they live, their sex, their race, their sexuality or their disability.

The way to do this is focused very firmly on fairness for each individual. That is why we have brought together the units focusing on different areas of equality into the single Equality Hub. That is why I am pleased that we have appointed Kishwer Falkner as the new head of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. She is resolutely focused on enforcing equality legislation rather than providing a running commentary on equality issues. That is why I have commissioned the equality data programme, which is identifying the biggest gaps in equality of opportunity across the country, but also across the groups I have just mentioned above. I will say more about our initial findings in July. In particular, as part of our levelling-up work, we feel there has been an insufficient focus on geographical inequality and the opportunity gaps across the country. That is why I am pleased that we are relocating the Equality Hub to the north of England.

I am also pleased that the Equality Hub has taken on responsibility for the Social Mobility Commission. We launched a campaign to recruit a new chair for the commission a few weeks ago. I want the commission to focus on the key drivers of equality: education, employment and enterprise. I want the commission to be able to hold the Government to account on how it is doing to achieve those objectives.

Q47 **Chair:** Last week, we heard from former members of the LGBT advisory panel. They were critical that you lacked passion for the role. How would you persuade people that equalities are what gives you your burning desire to get up in the mornings?



Elizabeth Truss: I am very passionate about the equality agenda. I have believed in it since I got involved in politics. I believe that everybody should be treated equally regardless of their background, sex or sexuality. It is one of the factors that motivate me in politics. With our work through the Equality Hub, we are looking right across the board at where the greatest issues of concern are and how we can address them.

Q48 **Chair:** Given that your role in international trade clearly takes up a huge proportion of your time, how are you prioritising equality? How do you decide which of the stakeholders you will meet with?

Elizabeth Truss: My focus on equality is, first of all, bringing together the Equality Hub under the leadership of Marcus Bell in the Cabinet Office. Previously, we had disparate leadership across the Race Disparity Unit, the Disability Unit and the Government Equalities Office. We brought that together under a single leadership. We have a coherent programme that we are clear about achieving.

We are focusing on broadening out the contributions to the equality agenda. For example, we are running the gender equality advisory council for the G7 under the leadership of Sarah Sands, who is a former journalist for both the "Today" programme and the *Telegraph*. We have invited people like Professor Sarah Gilbert, who spearheaded the Oxford vaccine; Ritu Karidhal, who helped India's Mars orbital mission; and Iris Bohnet, who is a professor at Harvard and an expert in how you help institutions and organisations to become fairer for people.

We want to broaden out the range of people we are engaging in the equality debate. I have the same plans to broaden out the debate in areas like LGBT. We have launched our plans for a conference, which will be the first ever LGBT conference that we hold here in the United Kingdom, under the theme of "safe to be me" and the leadership of Lord Herbert. Again, we want to broaden out the contributions so that we really make sure that equality is for everyone, as I outlined in my speech last December.

Of course, I have a busy job at the Department for International Trade. I feel this job is very compatible. We are making sure that we embed equality right across the Government. I know we have had this discussion before, Chair, about whether it should exist as a separate entity that deals with equality. But I very firmly feel that it works better when it is embedded as a core part of Government and every Department, whether it is the Department for Education, the Home Office or the Foreign Office, feels a responsibility to deliver it as part of its agenda.

By the way, we are taking the same approach at the G7. We have a number of tracks. For example, I am running the trade track. The Foreign Secretary is running the foreign affairs track. We also have the gender equality advisory committee that works across the tracks, making sure that gender equality is embedded in everything we do.



Q49 **Chair:** Who is the champion for equality in Cabinet?

Elizabeth Truss: Me.

Q50 **Chair:** Is anyone else?

Elizabeth Truss: As I have said, all of my colleagues are concerned about equality. This morning at Cabinet, we discussed levelling up. Of course, it is key to the equality agenda to make sure that people right across the country, regardless of their background, sexuality or race, have opportunities. Yes, I am overall head of equality for the Government, but many others are very concerned about this agenda too.

Q51 **Chair:** In your comments just now, you spoke about “safe to be me” and the conference that you are setting up. Do you include organisations like the Evangelical Alliance in that space?

Elizabeth Truss: I do not have any comments on that specific organisation. The aim of the conference is to persuade countries across the world to improve their legislation around LGBT people. In some countries, being LGBT is criminalised, which we think is completely wrong and abhorrent. In other countries, there is not enough effort to tackle persecution and discrimination. Those are the objectives of the conference. We will set out more details in due course.

Q52 **Chair:** How do you balance the competing, and perhaps sometimes conflicting, aspects of your role? It is absolutely crucial to promote LGBT rights, but how do you balance that with the right to prayer?

Elizabeth Truss: You have to start from the point of view of individual humanity and dignity. That is the cornerstone of what I believe in. Every individual has the right to live their life as they see fit, provided they are not harming the rights and abilities of others. Our mission should be about empowering people to live the life that they want. That is why areas like education are so important so that people are able to develop the capabilities to live a full life. That is why employment is so important: the value of being able to have a job and have economic independence. That is why enterprise is so important: the ability to set up a business and be able to decide your own destiny in that way. Those are the important underpinnings.

One of the criticisms that I have of the identity politics approach is that it seeks to divide people into different groups when all of us have multifaceted identities. What connects us all is that we are human. Fundamentally, we should judge people on those individual human capabilities and abilities, not their characteristics that I have just described.

Q53 **Chair:** You are absolutely right about the importance of empowering human beings. Does that also include moving swiftly to protect them from practices that might be harmful?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Elizabeth Truss: It absolutely does, of course. For example, there are three focuses of the gender equality advisory council: making sure girls have 12 years of education and getting more women into areas like STEM, where there is more earnings and business potential; helping women-led businesses get more access to capital; and ending violence against women and girls. If there is violence or there are terrible practices like female genital mutilation, that is not only abhorrent in itself; it also cuts off those women and girls from potential opportunities in the future. Of course, it is very important that people are fundamentally safe. Hence, the LGBT conference is titled "safe to be me".

Q54 **Chair:** How does the work of the GEO and the Equality Hub's Ministers co-ordinate across those issues like education and violence against women and girls? How often is the ministerial team meeting to make sure that there is a cross-Government championing of equality?

Elizabeth Truss: We have regular meetings of the Equalities ministerial team, but also more broadly across Government. We co-ordinate very closely with the Cabinet Office overall. Of course, we bring in Ministers from the relevant Government Departments to discuss particular issues. I also have bilateral meetings, as do my colleagues Minister Badenoch and Baroness Berridge.

Q55 **Chair:** When you say "regularly", is that weekly?

Elizabeth Truss: Roughly speaking. Every week is different in politics, as I am sure you know.

Q56 **Chair:** Most Government Departments would have a weekly prayers meeting. Does your Equalities team?

Elizabeth Truss: We do not pray in the Equality Hub, but we do have regular meetings.

Q57 **Chair:** That is "prayers" as in the ministerial team meeting, Liz, not actually praying. You have a weekly team meeting.

Elizabeth Truss: Sometimes it is with the Ministers of the Department. Sometimes it is more widely across Government.

Q58 **Chair:** When you look at the scale and breadth of the equalities issues that emerged during the pandemic, which one concerns you most? What are you doing to address it?

Elizabeth Truss: Of course, the pandemic had a devastating effect on everybody. Let us be clear. This is a once in a huge number of years event and it had a very difficult impact. There were clearly issues in areas like domestic violence, for example, that were deeply concerning. We have been in touch and working with the Home Office on those issues. The Home Secretary announced a scheme to provide extra funding and support for those suffering from domestic violence.



Separately, the Prime Minister directly commissioned Kemi Badenoch to do work on racial disparities, which was obviously also a key issue during the pandemic. We have ensured through our charity grants that charities, including LGBT charities, have had access to funding to be able to provide support. This was a national crisis, as I am sure I do not need to tell people on this Committee.

Q59 Chair: What level of priority would you give women's economic recovery in that list? We are absolutely right to have a strategy against violence and domestic abuse, as well as the work that Kemi is doing on black and minority ethnic communities and the response that we need there. Where would you rank female economic empowerment in that?

Elizabeth Truss: As I said at the start of the meeting, we are looking at equality issues across the board: geographical inequality, gender inequality and inequality between different ethnic minority groups. We are looking across the board.

One of the things that the data programme, which is reporting in July, will report on is precisely looking at where the biggest gaps are and have been. For example, we know that the wage gap between London and the north-east is bigger than the wage gap between men and women. That is presenting a broad national picture. I am sure we will find out through the work we are doing that there are much more specific issues in specific local areas.

It is very hard to generalise about what the biggest problem is. We will find in different parts of the country that there are different issues. There are certainly issues pertaining to women and the sectors they are employed in, as you have highlighted, Chair. There are also clearly issues concerning racial equality, which Kemi Badenoch is looking at. It is very hard to say, "Here is a list of what is important and what is not important."

I go back to my original point. I look from the point of view that every person in this country deserves fair treatment; every person deserves opportunity. If we try too much to say, "It is about this group or that group", we miss that broader picture. Of course, I have talked about geographical inequality, but there is also the underlying issue of socioeconomic inequality. Through the Social Mobility Commission, I want to really tackle where those most difficult areas are.

The other point I would make is that there was an immediate effort, as the pandemic began, to deal with issues, whether it was domestic violence or putting the furlough scheme in place, to make sure that people were safe and had the finances they needed to get through. We are now looking at the longer-term picture. There are some areas such as flexible working, and we have done a lot of work on this at the Equality Hub, in which there is an opportunity to encourage more flexible working or make flexible working the norm because there has been a change during the pandemic. As well as being problems to address, there are



also things that have changed, which we then need to use to create a better culture in the future.

Q60 **Chair:** In your opening statement, you said that was one of the issues that kept people awake at night was whether they were being paid fairly. Why are you so resistant to an ethnicity pay gap reporting scheme?

Elizabeth Truss: The issue of ethnic pay gap reporting is one for BEIS. We are in discussions with BEIS about the best way of making sure pay is fair. One of the key things we are doing is making sure that the Equality and Human Rights Commission under the leadership of Kishwer Falkner is focused on enforcing pay fairness.

One of the causes of the gender pay gap, or roughly 35% of it, is the different occupations that men and women are in. It is so-called occupational segregation. The root cause of that is girls and boys studying different subjects at school and going into different careers. The answer to that is what we are doing in encouraging more girls to take up STEM subjects, opening up more professions and opportunities. It is not as simple as saying, "A pay gap is about unfairness in the workplace." The unfairness in the workplace exists. We want the EHRC to focus more on that. The absolute core of its job is making sure that people are not discriminated against in the workplace.

If you are looking at some of these gaps, there can be other causes. The other cause of the gender pay gap, at 40%, is the so-called motherhood penalty. There are a variety of issues, such as different lengths of time taken on leave, the cost of childcare, all those types of issues, which again are longstanding issues. The vast majority of the pay gap is not necessarily an employer being unfair in a workplace. There are longstanding issues.

Back to what I was saying about the data programme that we are doing, we also need to look at why wages are so much higher in some parts of the country than others. Why are more senior jobs available in some parts of the country than others? Those are a core part of the work the equalities team should be doing alongside the very important work we are doing on racial and gender inequality.

Q61 **Chair:** You have been quite a champion of flexible working and the lessons that we can learn from the pandemic about how to work more flexibly. Were you disappointed that there was no employment Bill in the Queen's Speech that would have enabled flexible working to be championed legislatively rather than just as a cultural thing?

Elizabeth Truss: You are right that I am a supporter of flexible working. It is in the interest of employers as well as employees. Presenteeism is not a good way of running business. It is much better to focus on what people do rather than how many hours they spend in the office. During the pandemic, we have seen much more flexible working happening. I am



HOUSE OF COMMONS

in discussions with the Business Secretary about this on a regular basis and I hope that we will bring forward further plans at some point.

Chair: Being “in discussions” and “hope” do not give us a Bill, do they?

Q62 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Thank you to the Secretary of State for joining us this afternoon. Secretary of State, last week this Committee heard some quite damning testimony from former members of the LGBT advisory panel who told us that you had created a hostile environment for LGBT people since your appointment as Secretary of State and Minister for Equalities. How do you respond to that?

Elizabeth Truss: The LGBT panel was appointed by the previous Government on a time-limited basis until the end of March this year. Of course, we are grateful for the contribution it made. There were fundamental disagreements, namely that members of the panel supported self-ID for gender recognition certificates. I very strongly feel, as I have made clear, that checks and balances are needed. The issue here is fundamentally a difference of opinion on that issue.

Q63 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Given that difference of opinion, do this Government intend to honour the commitments made in the LGBT action plan in 2018?

Elizabeth Truss: We have set out our plan for LGBT advancement of rights. I talked earlier about the LGBT international conference, and that will be the first one that the United Kingdom has ever held. It will be on the theme of “safe to be me” and will show our global leadership on the issue. We also announced in the Queen’s Speech that we will legislate to ban conversion therapy in this country. We are also working with business to make sure there is good support for LGBT people in business, particularly small business. Those are the priorities as I have set them out. I will be appointing an LGBT panel in due course to support those priorities.

Q64 **Alex Davies-Jones:** The LGBT action plan, as you will know, commits that the GEO provides yearly updates to this Committee on its implementation. This Committee has not had an update since July 2018. Why is that?

Elizabeth Truss: It is probably because there is a new Government in place under the leadership of Boris Johnson.

Q65 **Alex Davies-Jones:** So we should scrap the previous LGBT action plan.

Elizabeth Truss: What I am saying is that that was set out by the previous Administration. I have laid out what our priorities are. The Prime Minister made clear in the Queen’s Speech that we are moving forward on banning conversion therapy and the LGBT conference. Those are our priorities.

Q66 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Parts of your “new fight for fairness” speech that you made last December upset key equality stakeholders, particularly



those who are focused on race and LGBT issues. Did you mean to single out those groups for criticism? If so, why?

Elizabeth Truss: My aim in the speech was to broaden the equality agenda so that it is relevant to everybody in our country. I come from the point of view that every person is important. Their humanity and dignity are important, and we should look at the inequality people face across the board. My aim is not to exclude people. My aim is to make this not a specialised conversation among a few groups, but a much broader conversation across the whole country. That is why we are relocating the Equality Hub to the north of England.

Q67 **Alex Davies-Jones:** On that point, as you have said, there is a new Government in place since the last action plan. There is a new regime with a new focus. What can the Equality Hub do differently to support a less divisive tone, listen more carefully, consistently listen to a range of views and find common ground on complex rights issues?

Elizabeth Truss: We want to bring in a wider range of people who can provide a broad perspective. I have shown this with the recruitment of the GEAC panel. We will look to do that through the recruitment of our new LGBT panel and across the board. As I said in my speech in December, it is very important that our work is embedded in data and evidence about where the particular barriers are, what we can do to solve that and how we can help people to be empowered to lead the lives that they want to live. I will make a further speech in July, alongside the publication of the initial findings of that equality data study, in which I will give a forward look about how we are going to address those issues.

Q68 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Finally, you mentioned that you will recruit shortly for a new LGBT advisory panel. Will that recruitment be open and transparent? How will you conduct the recruitment process?

Elizabeth Truss: We will shortly put out an expression of interest for that. I am particularly keen to make sure that we recruit people from right across the country, not just the big metropolitan areas but also towns and villages, to get a broad national representation.

Q69 **Elliot Colburn:** Marcus, can I turn to you to begin this next set of questions? They are around the Equality Hub and its structure, governance, leadership and strategy. The Equality Hub has not published any corporate documents. When do you envisage publishing a strategic plan for the Equality Hub?

Marcus Bell: The Equality Hub is a component of the Cabinet Office; that is the Government Department that we are part of. Details about the Equality Hub will be set out in the Cabinet Office departmental plan, which will be available shortly, possibly later this week. We are not planning to publish a separate document about the Equality Hub specifically, but the Committee has asked, and can continue to ask us, questions. We would be happy to answer them.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q70 **Elliot Colburn:** In that case, I can probably guess the answer to this next question. If it is not the case that the Equality Hub will publish specific documents, do I take it that that Equality Hub's financial and staffing information broken down by its consistent units—the GEO, the Race Disparity Unit, and the Disability Unit, for example—will not be published as part of that?

Marcus Bell: Information to that level of disaggregation will not be available in the Cabinet Office's plan, but I would be happy to provide it to the Committee.

Q71 **Elliot Colburn:** Thank you, Marcus. That would be very helpful indeed. Do you have any indication of the financial and staffing implications of the sponsorship of the Social Mobility Commission?

Marcus Bell: The Social Mobility Commission formally transferred to the Cabinet Office, and therefore to the Equality Hub, in April this year, so quite recently. Its budget of £3 million and secretariat of 25 people, from memory, have transferred in their entirety to us.

Q72 **Elliot Colburn:** Secretary of State, you mentioned in your opening remarks that the Equality Hub will indeed move to the north of England. First, do you have any kind of timescale that you could give us? Secondly, could you explain a little bit more about the rationale for moving a central co-ordinating function like the Equality Hub, which has a relatively low level of a public-facing element, out of Whitehall, where it might be more effective in pulling different Government Departments together?

Elizabeth Truss: Marcus, it might be worth you just telling the Committee what the budget is so that everyone is aware of that. That is going to be published this week. I will then answer your question, Eliot.

Marcus Bell: The budget for the Equality Hub for the current year is £16.6 million, not including money for the Social Mobility Commission.

Elizabeth Truss: To be clear, we have been, through our forward programme, making sure that we are able to afford everything we are planning to do. Of course, with respect to the LGBT conference, that is in conjunction with the Foreign Office as well. It is involved. An SRO who is from the Foreign Office is in charge of that project, reporting jointly into me and Dominic Raab, the Foreign Secretary. That is the budget situation.

In terms of the Equality Hub moving to the north of England, you said it was a back office, but we want it to be more of a front office. We want to see more consultation with the broader public. We want our team to do that. There is an overall plan by Government called Places for Growth, which is about making sure that we are recruiting senior civil servants outside London. The Department for International Trade, for example, is setting up a major operation in Darlington. MHCLG is basing itself in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Wolverhampton. The Cabinet Office overall is going to Glasgow. Is that right?

Marcus Bell: Glasgow and York.

Elizabeth Truss: This is an overall Government programme. It is about bringing the jobs and opportunities to those locations, but also making sure that Government policy is formed with a wider range of people directly engaging in it. That is part of the reason. Of course, the Equality and Human Rights Commission has a base in Manchester as well.

It is not a barrier to success to be based in the north of England. It will help contribute to bringing this agenda forward. It is a good thing that we are able to engage in that part of the country. I appreciate, Elliot, that you are an MP who is not located in that area, but do not worry. I am sure there will still be some staff in the London office as well. The important thing there is that the overall headquarters will be in the north of England.

You have asked me for the timeframe. That will be set up in July. I will say more about that when we announce the early results of the equality data programme.

Q73 **Elliot Colburn:** You have touched on my next point. You mentioned that you imagine that some staff will remain in London. This might be more of a question for Marcus, so forgive me. Do come in, Marcus, if you feel like this is probably one for you. With this move, how are you ensuring that the many very qualified staff who are working at the Equality Hub are consulted, and this does not lead to a loss of those highly skilled staff?

Marcus Bell: We would always consult staff about any relocation. It is worth saying about this relocation, not just for the Equality Hub, but for the Civil Service generally at the moment, that it will be quite incremental. The plan is not to suddenly ask people to move 200 miles away at a month's notice or anything like that. It is to concentrate future recruitment on particular areas. Over time, we would expect to see the proportion of staff based in the north of England build up. Given the average amount of churn there is in the Civil Service because people move jobs relatively often, you would expect to see significant change in the balance of where people are within two, three or four years.

I will just make one comment. I am based in London at the moment myself, but I have previously done national policy jobs from the north of England. It was in Sheffield, as it happens. It is perfectly doable.

Q74 **Elliot Colburn:** Secretary of State, are you confident that, with this move and the structure of the Equality Hub as it is, it can continue to fulfil this role of being a cross-departmental organisation that can get equality into the very heart of what every Government Department is doing?



Elizabeth Truss: Yes, I am. We are working to make sure that equality is embedded in every Government Department. I do think the equality data programme is going to help us pinpoint where the biggest issues are. So far, I have mentioned the Foreign Office, the Department for Education and the Home Office. There are potentially lots of avenues that we can pursue, but the data will give us a real sense of the biggest areas of focus and where we need to make the most difference.

Q75 **Chair:** Can I just ask a follow-up question to Marcus talking about recruitment and transitioning to the north of England? Does a sense of, as you put it, two, three or four years give an idea of the urgency and determination that there is to do this?

Marcus Bell: All I can say is that that is the timescale that we are working to. This is expected to lead to significant change over time, but not suddenly. That is consistent with a careful and cautious strategy.

Q76 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** My first question is for the Secretary of State. What lessons have you and your Department learned from the pandemic about anticipating, identifying and mitigating inequalities exacerbated by emergency situations?

Elizabeth Truss: First of all, there will be a wider look at the overall lessons from the pandemic once we are through to a greater extent. It really has been all hands on deck, first of all in addressing the immediate issues arising from lockdown. There has been a lot of work, led by my colleague Kemi Badenoch, in terms of racial equality, especially in areas like vaccine take-up. We are now in the phase of working to make sure that the recovery is fair for everybody, including for disadvantaged groups. That is where we are putting our focus at the moment. In terms of lessons learned, it is probably a bit too early to have a full review of that, but I am sure we will be very interested in the recommendations of the Committee.

Q77 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** How would you say that was difficult? A number of reports and inquiries have indicated that those with special characteristics and groups that were disadvantaged were more likely to experience such exacerbated inequality during this period of time.

Elizabeth Truss: This is why the Treasury set up schemes like the furlough scheme. We knew that some people were in more exposed occupations. We understood that there were particular issues, for example, with small businesses. We understood that some jobs were more exposed to Covid issues. There has been a cross-Government effort to make sure that everybody is supported as much as possible.

In terms of the recovery from the pandemic, there is a particular focus, and this is true in both our national work and our international work, on making sure that women are a strong part of the recovery and we are doing the things we need to. For example, during the pandemic, it was a focus to make sure that childcare settings remained open so that parents could get back to work. It was extremely difficult for many parents—I



completely understand that—during the early phases of the pandemic when those settings were closed. In the most recent experience of lockdown, the fact that we were able to make schools open again was a reflection on a lot of the issues that families had suffered during the early phases of the pandemic. I see this through my job in trade, looking at the international experience. These are challenges that countries around the world have faced and had to deal with. The question is now how we make sure that we have a recovery that is fair for everybody and leaves nobody behind.

Q78 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: During the early stages of the pandemic, the Committee's focus was on the impact of Covid-19 and the subsequent lockdowns and Government support packages for those with protected characteristics. I am sure your Department was listening intently to the responses that we received from several stakeholders and organisations invited to give evidence. Is there anything that you feel your Department missed or failed to account for when aiding the Government's response to the pandemic? How will this inform matters going forward, given that the lasting impact of the pandemic will go on for some time?

Elizabeth Truss: I mentioned earlier violence against women and girls. There are particular concerns about domestic violence, childcare facilities and vaccine take-up among some groups. These issues are fundamentally dealt with right across the Government. Of course, we monitor those issues.

The Minister for Women, Baroness Berridge, has been doing a series of roundtables on the topic. Kemi Badenoch has been working on the impact on ethnic minorities. Of course, we work closely with DWP and the Minister for Disabilities, Justin Tomlinson, who is looking at the impact on disabled people. Fundamentally, a lot of these issues pertain to the Government Department itself, where that is the Home Office or the Department for Education. Our role is to make sure, in the way that they design the policy, including through the equality impact assessments they do, which the Equality Hub provides support on, that they are being as fair to everybody as possible.

Our forward agenda of having much better data about exactly what is happening will help us do a better job in future and really pinpoint where the precise issues are. One of the things that I have identified in this job is that we do not have enough information about some of these issues. This equality data project will really put us in a much stronger position by linking up different bits of data across Government to get a clearer picture about where the most pressing issues are.

Q79 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: My next question is to both of you. Do you intend to make any changes to the structure of the governance of the Equality Hub to better enable it to anticipate, identify and mitigate against exacerbating inequalities in emergencies?



Marcus Bell: We have made some changes already, particularly in terms of integrating different functions in the hub. You recognise that the Equality Hub is made up of three constituent units and there was some duplication of functions between them. There is joined-up capacity in things like business support and communications. There is scope for a bit more along those lines, particularly around data, which is a particular priority for us, as the Secretary of State has said.

I am not sure we are planning to make structural changes in terms of dealing with emergencies. We have learned a huge amount about emergencies and how to deal with equalities in them over the last year. Perhaps to expand a little bit on what the Secretary of State has been saying, there are real advantages from our location in the Cabinet Office. That is responsible for co-ordinating the Covid response generally. We have been very closely involved in many aspects of that, from an ethnic minority and disability perspective in relation to public health measures and mortality, but also more widely on things like communications and thinking about the recovery. I just wanted to say that structurally, because we are part of the Cabinet Office, we have been very closely involved in many aspects of the pandemic response. Our advice has often been sought about the equalities aspects of it. Sometimes, we offered it when it was not sought.

Elizabeth Truss: I go back to my previous point about data. Government could always do with better data and we need to get better at linking up all the data we have. One of the advantages of this equality data project is that we are linking up things like HMRC data and things from the LEO database about people's long-term prospects. We are looking right across Government. That is ultimately what will help us to do a better job in the future and make sure we are focused on the key issues when they occur.

As I said, there will be a broader review of our overall response to the pandemic. Of course, how we look at the equality issues in that broader response, I have no doubt, will be part of that review. We are still very much in real time, so we are still working on how we make sure the recovery is fair. The Committee Chair pressed me earlier on the issue of flexible working; I want to see that happen. I want to see flexible working become the norm. We need to look also at issues like childcare support and the continued disparity on the motherhood penalty. These things should all be part of our forward-going plan and we are working on them.

Q80 **Bell Ribeiro-Addy:** Could I ask about your support for the national risk register? You may be aware that Equally Ours recommended that equality considerations be included in the contingency planning and that the Equality Hub be involved in developing specifically the next national risk register. What are your views on that?

Marcus Bell: Discussions about how that is going to work are continuing at official level. I do not have a clear answer for you at the moment, but I am sure we can provide one.



Q81 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: My next question is going to be about the current redeployment issues in the Equality Hub and how they have impacted ongoing work. Marcus, what work has been halted or delayed as a result of 35% of Equality Hub staff moving to other Departments during this period to help the pandemic effort?

Marcus Bell: In the early months of the pandemic, quite large numbers of staff from the Equality Hub, including me, were redeployed to other parts of Government to help with what, after all, was a national emergency. A number of bits of work were paused at that time, but the great majority have been picked up since. The number of staff who were redeployed was around 50 in total, but all bar six of those have returned now. That was a temporary response to an emergency situation. I do not think it has had a lasting impact on capacity in the hub. It meant that some bits of work needed to be delayed while staff were redeployed to help elsewhere.

Q82 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Are you able to go into some more detail on any particular pieces of work that were delayed or halted?

Marcus Bell: For example, some of the work that we planned to do on the national strategy for disabled people had to go on pause from March to May last year. Plan A had been to put out that strategy in the first months of this year. Basically, the net effect was to delay it three or four months because some staff were redeployed elsewhere. That is one example. I cannot think of anything that we have dropped altogether because some staff were not around for three months.

Q83 Bell Ribeiro-Addy: My final question is to the Secretary of State on the same issue. Given the equality issues that emerged during the pandemic, why was it felt necessary to deploy such a large proportion of the Equality Hub? We understand that we are dealing with an unprecedented situation, but there were so many issues for those with protected characteristics. Could I also ask who took that decision? Do you believe at the end of it all that that was the right decision to take?

Elizabeth Truss: I am very proud that so many of our staff stepped up to the plate to deal with real emergencies. For example, staff helped British people get repatriated to the UK in very difficult circumstances. It was the right thing to do. It was an emergency situation. If you remember back to this time last year, it was very difficult. It is just important to understand the nature of what we do. Generally speaking, the Equality Hub does not provide operational immediate support. We are fundamentally a policy Department that makes sure that policies are in place across Government, looks at data and analysis, persuades other Government Departments to act, and raises issues with other Government Departments. We are not fundamentally an operational Department.

When some of our operations were under strain—and I am talking about issues like getting Brits back here during the pandemic, helping get PPE



and vital equipment for our National Health Service into the country—it was absolutely right that Equality Hub staff stepped up to the plate. As Marcus has made very clear, since then, they have been working full tilt in making sure that we are dealing with issues across the board, but also that we are preparing for the recovery.

Q84 Chair: Secretary of State, can I just take you back to some of the comments that you have made about vaccine take-up? We heard from Minister Badenoch that concerns about fertility in young women in relation to the vaccine were very potent. Can I ask whether you feel that the Government already had sufficient data to know that there would be vaccine hesitancy among some groups and communities or whether there is still a need to collect more?

Elizabeth Truss: This is really an issue that Kemi and the Department of Health have been leading on. My understanding is certainly that we were aware that there would be vaccine hesitancy among certain groups. Marcus might be able to give a bit more detail.

Marcus Bell: We could always do with more data about vaccine hesitancy, although we already know quite a lot. The main observation I would make is that there has been a lot of movement in vaccine hesitancy since we started vaccinating and collecting vaccine data. The number of people who are reluctant to take the vaccine has declined quite significantly, including in ethnic minority groups. We do not know how things will change for the future. The clear message there is to carry on collecting good-quality data and seeing what it tells us.

Q85 Chair: Are you now making an effort to collect data around refusals as opposed to hesitancy?

Marcus Bell: We are not at that point yet, no. We get really up-to-date data from the Department of Health about vaccines, but it does not cover absolutely everything.

Q86 Kate Osborne: Good afternoon to the Secretary of State and Marcus. My first question is for the Secretary of State. In northern constituencies like mine in the north-east, I am not sure if people, and I include myself in this, know what levelling up really means or looks like. Can you share your definition in more detail with us, and not just lines or slogans like “not leaving communities behind”? What do you really consider levelling up to mean?

Elizabeth Truss: What I mean by levelling up, and I did mention this earlier in my presentation, is equality of opportunity. It is making sure that people, wherever they are in the country, have the same access to opportunity as others. We know at the moment there is a gap. For example, I pointed to the wage gap between the north and the south. We know that there is a wage gap between men and women.

By the way, I do not just see levelling up as a geographical issue. I also see it as an issue between different groups, whether they are men,



HOUSE OF COMMONS

women, ethnic minority groups or LGBT people. Making sure that they are treated fairly is all part of levelling up. We are recruiting for a new chair of the Social Mobility Commission and we will present more data on this subject in July.

The key areas we need to monitor the data on include education. Are we seeing equal education opportunities in terms of the number of students who are able to take STEM courses or achieve five good GCSEs? Are there the same opportunities in terms of senior-level jobs and progression at work? Are there also opportunities for enterprise? How easy is it to set up a business or access capital, whether you are in a particular part of the country and whether you are a woman or a man?

Those are the types of areas that we need to monitor. Government need to be held to account to see whether we are indeed levelling up in them. I am working very closely with Neil O'Brien, who is the Government's levelling-up lead, and working across Government. A lot of the issues I have mentioned pertain to the Department for Education, BEIS or other Government Departments. That is certainly the framework I would look at it through.

Q87 **Kate Osborne:** If you consider that it is an equalities issue, what role will you and the other GEO Ministers have in developing the levelling-up White Paper?

Elizabeth Truss: We are involved in developing the levelling-up White Paper. I have talked about some of the issues I am concerned about that should be reflected in the levelling-up agenda. I see the Social Mobility Commission as a key way of producing metrics that can be used to illustrate how we are doing on achieving levelling up. The equality data programme that I have been talking about will be important in being able to measure some of the variables that we have discussed, so we can see where the gaps are.

I gave the high-level figure on wages earlier about the difference between the north-east and London, and men and women. But we need to be much more granular because there is a big difference between major metropolitan areas and towns, for example. There are differences between socioeconomic groups. If you look at women and men from different socioeconomic groups, you will find different patterns in terms of employment and gender wage gaps. These are the types of things that we need to become much more aware of to deal with the real issues and what is driving them. We should be able to explain, for example, whether those jobs are not available because sufficient courses in STEM subjects are not being offered in a given area. Is there some other causal factor? Those are the types of things we need to analyse.

Q88 **Kate Osborne:** Witnesses who have spoken to us have suggested that enactment of the Equality Act's socioeconomic duty is an oven-ready solution to your new broader focus on socioeconomic and geographic inequality. Have you considered piloting this approach in the way that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Scotland, Wales and some councils have?

Elizabeth Truss: I am not convinced, to be honest, that it is the solution. I am happy to look at it, but I am not convinced that it is the solution. The first port of call is getting better data on exactly what is happening across the country and the types of solutions that we need to find.

As I said in my speech that I made at the end of last year, the answers to these equality questions often do not lie within the equality portfolio. If we find that girls are taking up STEM courses at a much lower rate than boys, it might be something in schools or the education curriculum. It is not necessarily something that falls within the bailiwick of the Equality Act. If we find that women are finding it harder to access finance for their businesses, that could be to do with the culture in banking, which does not have very much to do with the way that the Equality Act operates.

We need to look at what is causing those issues of inequality and look at the potential solutions. Broadly speaking, the solutions that work best are not the solutions that are targeted at a particular group, but rather the solutions that break down barriers and universalise opportunity. I talked earlier about flexible working. A study we did at the Equality Hub found that, when jobs were advertised as flexible, there was a 30% increase in applications. There were more applications from women than before. We know that more flexible working will lead to more women in high-paid jobs.

There are solutions that are not necessarily held by this Department, but this Department can shed a light on where those solutions are. Simply enacting the socioeconomic duty is not the panacea.

Q89 **Kate Osborne:** You have spoken today about your objection to the duty's focus on the equality of outcome and your preference for equality of opportunity. How do you intend to define and measure opportunities?

Elizabeth Truss: The three key areas of focus—this is very much what the Social Mobility Commission is going to focus on—are education, employment and enterprise. If we end up, many years hence, having seen the gaps in educational attainment closed, the gaps in ability to access finance for business closed and the gaps in the availability of high-skilled jobs closed, we will have moved a long way.

My view is that you do not necessarily get anywhere if you try to focus on too many things. It is important to focus on a few key metrics that are really going to drive that opportunity.

Q90 **Kate Osborne:** Your speech in December last year—it has been mentioned a few times—emphasised equal opportunity for disadvantaged communities in the north of England. Will your approach also cover the many disadvantaged communities in all parts of the country?



Elizabeth Truss: Yes, absolutely. What we are looking at is getting to a much more granular level of data about exactly where the issues are, by focusing on those key areas and seeing how people are disadvantaged. There are clearly different areas in different parts of the country. What is very stark, though, is the gap in economic opportunity. I have pointed to the wage gap. Those are very stark differences that are clear.

Our research coming out in July—I would be very happy to share more detail with the Committee—is going to give us a different level of granularity. It will be the first publication of data. I am sure Marcus can talk about the schedule. Getting this data ready is quite a time-consuming process, but we will be able to share more with the Committee in July. In the future, I hope that even more information and further detail will be available.

Marcus Bell: To expand on that, a lot of the data that the Government publish, and indeed use, is regional data or city region data. As your question implies, that often gets in the way of what is really going on. Some generally quite well-off areas have some disadvantaged communities in them, and they can disappear in the averaging. What we are trying to get at through the equality data programme is, as the Secretary of State said, really granular data. Where possible, it is by lower super output area, which equates to two or three streets or a council estate. That sort of size is the level we want to go down to, and we think that will tell us quite a lot more.

Q91 **Kate Osborne:** Secretary of State, you said in December that your new equality data programme will produce a new lifepath analysis of equality from the perspective of the individual, not groups. Can you tell us how this can align with the Government's legal obligations to groups protected by the Equality Act?

Elizabeth Truss: This is about getting more under the bonnet of what exactly is driving inequality in the United Kingdom. It is looking from the point of view of the individual and asking, "Is it the case that the educational opportunities are not good enough? Is it the case that there are not enough jobs in the area? Is it the case that there are not enough business opportunities? What is driving the gap and the disparity?" That will help us see whether there is a particular issue that is affecting just women. The absolutely obvious one that we know already is the motherhood gap. We know what the answers to that are: more affordable childcare, more sharing of parental responsibilities, more flexible working et cetera.

We know some of those things, but what we do not have, as Marcus pointed out, is the granularity and the ability to identify other potential issues. What is driving the wage gap between the north-east and London? What is driving the difference in opportunities between different ethnic minority groups? That is where this lifepath analysis, which we have never done before, is going to throw up new information and will inform us about how we develop Government policy.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

As I said, the Government policy that works best is where you have a universal solution that helps particular groups. I have highlighted flexible working as a key one. By the way, flexible working does not just help women. It also helps people who do not live in major metropolitan areas. We talked earlier about the Civil Service Places for Growth programme and how we are developing new operations not just in the cities around the UK but in towns like Stoke-on-Trent and Darlington. Again, it is about bringing opportunity to those areas.

The Government are walking the talk. At the same time as talking about how we want to see more senior jobs available in these locations, we are also make sure that the Government are doing that. We want to see businesses follow suit, too. The equality data project is providing us with the information so we can do that better.

Q92 **Kate Osborne:** I certainly hope that opportunity within the north-east will not just be within the Teesside area, which it so often seems to be at the moment. Marcus, you touched on geography in terms of how your approach will consider disadvantage across protected characteristics. How will it also consider socioeconomic factors as well as geography?

Marcus Bell: We are trying to look at as many factors as possible that are in the data. As the Secretary of State said, we are aiming to bring together several large datasets from different Government Departments and ask, "How do outcomes differ by geography?" but also, "How does that look when you look at it from the perspective of ethnicity, gender, age and so on? What is the relative importance of those factors?" In bringing a focus on socioeconomic disadvantage, we are not trying to move away from the other protected characteristics. We want an analysis that looks at all of them and tries to understand their relative importance.

The Secretary of State said to me fairly early on, when we were scoping the project, that she wanted to know more about whether race or socioeconomic background are more important in driving particular outcomes. That is precisely the kind of thing we are trying to get into.

Q93 **Kate Osborne:** Finally, when do you expect to publish the results of the new equality data programme?

Marcus Bell: We are expecting to publish some data and findings in July and to build from there. As the Secretary of State said, the ambition here is quite broad. We are aiming, eventually, to publish data on 20 to 30 metrics across education, employment, enterprise, health and so on. The way to go with something like this is to start small and build from there. It is worth saying that we are aiming not just to publish findings but to make the data available so that people can look at it themselves.

Q94 **Chair:** Secretary of State, you articulated the challenge around the motherhood penalty really well. It is only going to be resolved with more childcare, more shared parental responsibility and more flexibility. How frustrated are you that you are making no progress?



Elizabeth Truss: We are making some progress. We have increased the amount of free childcare available for three and four year-olds during the pandemic. Later on, we made sure that those childcare facilities were open, which was very important to parents. We were also the Government, as part of the coalition, that introduced shared parental leave.

Of course, there is more we can do. I am a passionate supporter of results over presenteeism in every possible area. I was a campaigner to change the hours in the House of Commons. There is more we can do in Parliament; there is more we can do across the country, to make sure we are valuing people for the contribution they make rather than the hours they sit in the office.

Chair: I would just point out that you were very quick to distance yourself from the 2018 LGBT action plan but have just managed to go back to the coalition Government when talking about shared parental leave. There could be a bit of consistency as to whether it is this Government's or former Governments' progress.

Q95 **Nicola Richards:** Secretary of State, you told us last year that it is not the GEO's responsibility to mainstream equalities work across Government. How does this align with the GEO's longstanding responsibility for cross-Government equalities work and its status as Government lead on the Equality Act?

Elizabeth Truss: We are responsible for co-ordination, but what we are not responsible for is doing other Departments' homework. They are responsible for making sure that what they do in the Home Office or the Department for Education is treating people fairly and equally. Of course, we give them support, and Marcus has talked about the support we give them on the equality impact assessment.

We also want to be providing them with more data and insight. An absolutely key focus is moving the Equality Hub from broader policy ideas into much more of a focus on where the real issues are and making sure that the data we have is informing them. Marcus has just talked about the rationale for why we set up the equality data project. Frankly, we did not have enough information about what exactly was driving disparities; we did not have enough information about where the key focuses should be. That is what I see as our role: driving that understanding across Government. One of the critical areas where there has not been enough work is on geographical inequality, which has been relatively underserved, I believe, as part of the equality agenda.

Q96 **Nicola Richards:** Marcus, you have said that Equality Hub officials provide equalities advice to Departments as required. What does this mean in practice?

Marcus Bell: If I could say a little bit about how we think about our work and how we work with Government Departments, that is probably the



right way to answer your question. The way that I think about it is that we do three different types of thing. There are some areas where we ourselves lead, and those have been covered extensively in the conversation so far. Essentially, it is things that are a priority for the current Government, which would include the disability strategy, the equality data programme, work on Covid disparities and so on. Those are things where the Equality Hub is leading the work across Government. That is the first category of things.

There is a second category of things where we have a supporting role with Departments, where they are in the lead but we have agreed to help for whatever reason, either because they asked for it or because we felt they needed some help. Some examples of that are the Windrush working group, where we have a supporting role to the Home Office; vaccine deployment, where again we have had a supporting role on equalities working with the Department of Health; and the work going on at the moment about violence against women and girls, where again there is a Home Office lead but we are closely involved. That is the second category of things where we are supporting.

The final one is that, in a limited number of areas, we try to support and influence Government as a whole. That covers data and the work that the Secretary of State has been describing on data, but it also covers guardianship of the Equality Act and advice to Departments about it. We would also see that as our responsibility.

I have just tried to describe typically how we work with Government Departments, but the background is that every single public policy issue has an equality dimension to it. We cannot be involved in everything, and indeed should not be. As the Secretary of State said, Departments should lead their own work. That should give you a sense of how we work practically with other Departments. Essentially, it is where there is something that is a priority for the current Government or where a Department particularly asks for help.

Q97 Nicola Richards: Do staff in the Equality Hub wait to be asked for advice by Departments or are you more proactive? Can you give any examples of this?

Marcus Bell: Both things happen. We are very well connected to other Government Departments and talk to them a lot. Sometimes they explicitly ask for help on particular issues. Sometimes the Government collectively decide that there ought to be a bit more of a focus in one area or a bit of support from the Equality Hub. It works both ways. Where there is an example of where we have muscled in on what a Department was doing, I had probably best not draw attention to it.

Q98 Nicola Richards: You have said that the Behavioural Insights Team helps Departments comply with the public sector equality duty and identify potential equality impacts on their policy work. Can you explain this approach? How long has it been running? How has it been evaluated?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Marcus Bell: The Behavioural Insights Team did a particular bit of work for the Government Equalities Office, which has now come to an end. That was not a permanent relationship or responsibility. That was something that BIT was specifically asked to do, which has now finished. It is not a permanent part of our arrangements.

Q99 **Elliot Colburn:** Marcus, this section of questions is about complying with international equality law. How many of your staff are dedicated to compliance with international equality law, including for example the UN convention on discrimination against women and the conventions on race and disabilities? Is there anyone dedicated to compliance with those?

Marcus Bell: There are dedicated people in both GEO and the Disability Unit whose job is international work and specifically the UN conventions that you mention. From memory, it is one or two in both cases. Clearly, the questions raised by those conventions are quite broad. What is the UK doing about gender equality? What is it doing about disability and how effective is it? When we are framing responses to international things like that, quite a larger number of people across the Equality Hub would be involved.

Q100 **Elliot Colburn:** Secretary of State, the GEO is directly responsible for compliance with the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. I will call it CEDAW from here on out to save time. In between reporting cycles, how do you work with other Government Departments to ensure compliance with CEDAW?

Elizabeth Truss: That is probably a question better directed at Marcus, to be fair.

Marcus Bell: The matters covered by CEDAW are the things that we talk to Government Departments about all the time. It is not like we have permanent work on CEDAW going on. We are focused on what the UK is doing domestically about gender equality. Periodically we report to the UN about how we are doing against specific things in CEDAW. We tabled our current report today.

I suppose I do not see a very hard and fast distinction between reporting to the UN about gender equality in the UK and trying to address gender equality in the UK. It is not a special area of work in that sense. Does that make sense?

Q101 **Elliot Colburn:** Yes, thank you. You have probably answered by next question. Just to double-check, then, based on that response, do I take it that there is no formal mechanism for engaging with civil society about the implementation of the UN conventions? It is just work that you see as woven in throughout what the GEO does.

Marcus Bell: There is not a formal mechanism in the sense that you mean it. I know it has been suggested. We do work quite closely with EHRC on that, but I am aware of the suggestion you have floated.



Elizabeth Truss: I wanted to follow up on that point, because of course the main vehicle at the moment for a lot of our international work has been the gender equality advisory council, which we are doing with the G7. It is important to note that it involves a lot of other countries around the world as well. It is giving advice to G7 leaders on gender equality issues around the world, in particular ending violence against women, empowering women economically and educating women and girls. We have representatives from around the world, but we have also involved the W7, which is women's groups in all of those nations.

At the leaders' summit, which is taking place in June, that group will be presenting recommendations, particularly on how to help women build back better after Covid across the globe. We are very engaged in that international debate, but it is particularly through that mechanism. I am sure it is because the UK is president of the G7 this year that we have taken that opportunity. We have restored the gender equality council. It was not run under the previous G7. We have restored it.

One thing it is looking at—this is Sarah Sands, who is leading it—is how we embed some of this metrics approach more broadly globally as well so we can measure progress on dealing with these issues. That is the main forum that I have been involved in, in terms of global gender equality.

Q102 **Elliot Colburn:** That leads quite nicely on to my final question. Is all of the work that you are conducting in relation to the G7, for example, and everything that you have just outlined the reason, then, why the GEO has resisted the calls from CEDAW and, indeed, from this Committee to establish a monitoring mechanism to ensure that women's rights are fulfilled under the convention? Is it because you see it as a doubling-up of the work that is already happening? Could you explain a little more about why that has not happened until now?

Elizabeth Truss: It might be better for Marcus to answer that question. I have been focusing on delivering the G7 GEAC, which we feel is a very, very effective mechanism. It has buy-in from the G7 countries but also more broadly. We think it can make a real difference, particularly given the very worrying increase in violence against women and girls during the pandemic across the world. We want to really push to have a strong statement from leaders but also to make real, measurable progress in the future.

Marcus Bell: The answer to the question is that, in our view, we have a robust mechanism at the moment through the work involving us, the EHRC and, indeed, this Committee. We were not convinced that there was an argument for moving to something else, but we are happy to carry on talking about it.

Q103 **Elliot Colburn:** It sounds to me, then, that you believe the existing mechanisms and the work that is being taken on as part of the G7, for example, is more effective to fulfil this role rather than the mechanism recommended under the convention. Would that be a fair comment?



Marcus Bell: That would be our current view, though, as I said, we are always open to new arguments.

Q104 **Kim Johnson:** Good afternoon, Marcus and Secretary of State. Secretary of State, you have spoken quite a lot this afternoon about the importance of data. How do you plan to use the data collected in the 2017 national LGBT survey, which identified the main issues that LGBT people face?

Elizabeth Truss: We have certainly taken forward the results of the survey we have done, particularly in addressing the issue of healthcare. We appointed a new LGBT healthcare adviser. He is working very closely with us and with the National Health Service. One of the issues has been the length of time taken to get treatment, and that is something we are pursuing and working on very closely with the Department of Health.

Q105 **Kim Johnson:** Could I also ask whether the LGBT advisory panel is a good model for race, sex and disability for drawing on external expertise to advise policymaking?

Elizabeth Truss: I am keen, as I have said, to establish a new panel to support our agenda. I will be recruiting for it. Once we have the early results from the equality data programme, I hope to look at what broader support we need to move forward our agenda. We will be recruiting for the LGBT panel. I will be saying more in July, when we launch the results of the equality data programme, about what else we need to do to support our agenda.

We also have the commissioners, whom we need to recruit, for the Social Mobility Commission. I am keen to have a broad range of people contributing but not to have too much of a proliferation of different bodies, because we want to keep focused on the main issues.

Q106 **Kim Johnson:** At the session that we had last week with former members of the panel, they mentioned that there were some issues in terms of recruiting particularly black LGBT people and people from the regions. Will you be making sure that there is a good spread of people representing all sectors?

Elizabeth Truss: Yes, definitely. That was one of the things that I mentioned earlier. We want to broaden the focus of people involved in our equality work. That applies to LGBT issues as well as the other issues that I mentioned earlier. In particular, I am very keen to make sure we have a good ethnic diversity as well as a strong geographical representation from across the UK.

Q107 **Chair:** Could I just have a follow-up on that? We heard from the panel last week about some of the challenges around intersectionality. I just wondered whether you thought there were any particular concerns as to how you in the future would go about engaging with Muslim communities and particularly people from an LGBT community who are also black, Muslim, Jewish et cetera.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Elizabeth Truss: The fundamental point is that we should be focusing on individual humanity and dignity, and making sure that everybody has the ability to live the life they wish to lead and the life they want to lead. Of course, sometimes these issues can come into conflict. I come back to the basic point that we cannot have people being prevented from leading the lives they wish to lead.

That is why we are banning conversion therapy, because it is fundamentally about the idea that people are saying, "This is wrong", and I find that completely abhorrent. I find it abhorrent that people are trying to prevent somebody from being LGBT. In short, we have to start from the perspective of looking at the person, their desires and wishes, what they are and who they are. That is the perspective we have to come from.

Q108 **Chair:** Does the further consultation period add an unnecessary delay and will it, therefore, prevent people from doing exactly as you have said, living their lives the way they want to?

Elizabeth Truss: It is important that there is a consultation before legislation. Otherwise you are subject to things like judicial review and there are potential unintended consequences. It is important that we explore all the issues before legislation takes place. If you recall, previously we had not committed to legislation. It was new at the Queen's Speech that we have committed to that legislation being on the statute book. That is a huge step forward, but it is right that we take the time to make sure that the legislation is absolutely right and is protected from anything like judicial review or misinterpretation.

Q109 **Chair:** When you say the Bill has to be right, when do you anticipate publishing a draft Bill? What is the timetable going to be on that?

Elizabeth Truss: We are planning to publish the consultation in September, and then we will be bringing forward legislation, I hope, by the end of the second session.

Chair: Can I take this opportunity to thank you both for having come to give evidence this afternoon? It has been very much appreciated.