

# Women and Equalities Committee

## Oral Evidence: [Unequal impact: Coronavirus \(Covid-19\) and the impact on people with protected characteristics](#), HC 276

Wednesday 22 April 2020

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Members present: Caroline Nokes (Chair); Nickie Aiken; Sara Britcliffe; Angela Crawley; Alex Davies-Jones; Peter Gibson; Kim Johnson; Kate Osborne; Nicola Richards.

Questions 1–80

Witnesses

I: Rt Hon Liz Truss MP, Minister for Women and Equalities, Government Equalities Office; Helen Cook, Private Secretary to the Minister for Women and Equalities, Government Equalities Office.



## Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Liz Truss and Helen Cook.

**Q1 Chair:** I would like to welcome the witnesses to our virtual meeting today. Thank you very much, Secretary of State and Minister for Women and Equalities, Liz Truss, and her Private Secretary, Helen Cook, for joining us. I would also like to thank Bow Tie TV and the Parliamentary Broadcasting Unit, who have given us so much support to make today's meeting possible.

Secretary of State, we were expecting our first session with you to be an introductory meeting that would cover a wide range of issues to do with the Government Equalities Office and your role. Unfortunately, the reality is that the majority of the meeting will be taken up talking about coronavirus, but I wanted to start with some more general questions and give you the opportunity to outline what you think has been your biggest achievement since taking the role up in September of last year, just over seven months ago, and to let us know what your biggest priority is going forward.

**Liz Truss:** Thank you very much, Caroline, and thank you to the Committee for convening today. As you rightly say, at the moment, the work of the Government Equalities Office is extremely focused on Covid, making sure that we are dealing with the immediate equalities issues during the crisis, but also making sure that the recovery we are planning benefits all across our nation equally, which is a key part of the Government's levelling-up agenda.

In my work as Minister for Women and Equalities, we have three key priorities. First of all, we aim to reshape the Government Equalities Office and bring it more closely together with the Cabinet Office units—the Racial Disparity Unit and the Disability Unit—to create an Equalities Hub. My intention is to move the Department physically, so that all of those people are sitting together and also to bring the work more closely together. We need to move away from the idea that we are simply dealing with groups that need to be catered for and, instead, make sure that we are looking at individuals across the country and really identifying who those most in need are, where the biggest barriers to success are and where the unequal delivery of public services is. I want the unit to become much more focused on analysing that data, looking at it very closely and then working to a hub-and-spoke model with the rest of Government, whether it is the Home Office on issues of crime or the Department of Education on issues of education, to implement those policies.

That is the change that I am making to the Government Equalities Office and indeed the whole Equalities unit. I am working very closely with Theo Agnew in the Cabinet Office to do that, because I want our policies to be



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

focused on individual dignity and opportunity, and we need to look at where the biggest barriers are. I would like to see us working more closely on issues such as geography, so where communities are being held back, and also on background and income, as well as gender, race and disability, so that we have a much more holistic picture. That is the overall direction in which I want to take the Government Equalities Office.

A particular focus is going to be women's economic empowerment. This will be particularly important as we leave the immediate issues of Covid and enter the recovery. Of course, we have had success in terms of getting more women employed than ever before in the UK, but it is nevertheless the case that women are significantly behind comparator countries in terms of setting up businesses and entrepreneurship. We know that it would contribute 10% extra to GDP if women had the same levels of participation in entrepreneurship as men. One of the things we have done so far is hosted a major reception at No. 10 with women entrepreneurs, leading women to move that agenda forward.

I am very pleased to say that, as a result of the recent reshuffle, we now have Kemi Badenoch supporting me as Equalities Minister. She is based at the Treasury, which is extremely important in terms of that overall economic agenda, so that has been a major focus.

The other area we are focused on is our international work. We were planning to hold an international LGBT conference in May. Regrettably, that has had to be postponed due to coronavirus, but we do want to hold that conference as soon as possible. We had already made significant plans, with Nick Herbert to chair the conference with the theme of "Safe To Be Me". That is very much about using the UK's strong record on LGBT rights and human rights to make that case across the globe and make sure that, wherever LGBT people live, they are safe to go about their daily business without fear of crime and harassment. That is also a very important priority. I have already participated in an event in Tokyo, launching the Asian chapter of that initiative. That is something we want to pursue further.

The final point I would like to make in this initial part is on the Gender Recognition Act. We have been doing a lot of work internally, making sure that we are in a position to respond to that consultation and launch what we propose to do on the future of the Gender Recognition Act. We will be in a position to do that by the summer. There are three very important principles that I will be putting in place. The first is the protection of single-sex spaces, which is extremely important. The second is making sure that transgender adults are free to live their lives as they wish without fear of persecution, whilst maintaining the proper checks and balances in the system.

It is also important—though this is not a direct issue concerning the Gender Recognition Act, it is relevant—to make sure that the under-18s are protected from decisions that they could make that are irreversible. I



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

believe strongly that adults should have the freedom to live their lives as they see fit, but it is very important that, while people are still developing their decision-making capabilities, we protect them from making those irreversible decisions.

Of course, some of these policies have been delayed by the specific issues around Covid, but I can assure you that, alongside the Covid work, our officials continue to do those things to make them happen.

**Q2 Chair:** Can I ask you about the time split of your two roles as Secretary of State for the Department for International Trade and Minister for Women and Equalities? Are you able to give us an indication of how much time is spent on each role?

**Liz Truss:** I have not filled in a timesheet, so it is a slightly difficult question to answer. During Covid, I am sitting on the economic committee; I do so both in my role as Trade Secretary and in my role as Minister for Women and Equality, so I am looking at things from both angles. That is what I try to do with my role. When I am travelling internationally, I conduct a number of meetings specifically on the women's brief, but often they will coincide with my trade brief. For example, the Australian Foreign Minister is also the Australian Minister for Women, so, during a meeting, we will talk about those issues.

That is the right approach. I know there are some people who would say we need to have a separate women's Minister and a separate women's Department. I do not think that is a helpful approach, because that lets other Departments off the hook for looking at equalities issues. I see my role as making sure that the Department for Education is looking at equalities issues when they do the work, and making sure that the Department of Health is likewise looking at that. If you have a separate dedicated women's Department, there is a tendency for other Departments to say, "That is the women's Department's problem. I am not going to think about those issues".

I do not have a specific amount of time that I could outline that I spend on this role. Meetings tend to be diarised in quite a fluid fashion. You will appreciate that since I started the role of Minister for Women, and indeed Trade Secretary, we have had an election and we have also had the Covid crisis. Necessarily, we have been focused on different issues, but I certainly feel that, with me and the team I have of Kemi Badenoch and Baroness Berridge, we are well able to make the important points that need to be made in the time available.

**Q3 Chair:** Do you regard it as part of your role to raise the profile of the Government Equalities Office and particularly the work that you do for women and equalities?

**Liz Truss:** I see my role as making sure the outcomes are better for women and ethnic minorities. As I have said, I want us to look more broadly at the geography of problems of discrimination against people of



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

particular backgrounds. I want to move beyond what are termed the protected characteristics, in terms of the 2010 Act, to look more broadly at where people are being held back by discrimination or by not having those opportunities.

In terms of policies that we are putting forward, for example, the Home Secretary made a very good announcement about the You Are Not Alone campaign on domestic violence, which clearly disproportionately hits women. We will work to amplify that at the Government Equalities Office, and we certainly do, but it is right and proper that that should be a priority of the Home Secretary. I want a whole-Government approach to promoting equality of opportunity and lack of discrimination for everybody. I do not want it to be seen as the sole responsibility of the Government Equalities Office.

**Q4 Chair:** I am glad you mentioned the Home Office's very important You Are Not Alone campaign. Some of us might think it was a bit slow off the blocks, given what we know has been a spike in domestic abuse. Can I just ask something on that? You regard it as your role to amplify that, yet, over the course of the month of April, you have tweeted 42 times about trade, five times about Norfolk in your constituency role, twice you have retweeted information about domestic abuse from the Home Office campaign and only once have you mentioned the wider work of the Government Equalities Office, and that was to congratulate Marsha de Cordova on becoming your shadow. You regard yourself as a prolific tweeter and boast of having one of the highest social media presences of any Minister. Do you think that is enough?

**Liz Truss:** I do not think you can measure work output by number of tweets. A lot of the work I do as Women and Equalities Minister is necessarily internal because, since the start of the Covid crisis, our Department has been supporting other Departments in terms of their equalities and impact assessments, making sure that they are doing the work to ensure that women, BAME communities and LGBT communities are being treated fairly. It is important that those Departments take ownership of those roles. Of course, I worked in support of Priti and the excellent campaign she is launching on domestic violence. I see that as very much the Home Office leading that work and GEO encouraging and supporting that work, rather than GEO being the headline Department in doing that.

The aim of the Department is not to aggrandise the Department. The aim of the Department is to make sure that, across Government, we are achieving what we need to, in terms of opportunities for people who have been discriminated against, where there are barriers to those people's success. It is right that we are working strongly internally to make those things happen. Of course, I will tweet about things as they happen, and do, and one of the points I made earlier is about how we are refocusing the GEO to spend more time on research and data so we can help inform



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

Government Departments in their activity. That is something that I want to build up strength in.

Q5 **Chair:** Specifically on the question of the Home Office's domestic abuse campaign, prior to the press release being issued, exactly what involvement and what input had you had into that campaign?

**Liz Truss:** I discussed it with the Home Secretary; my spads discussed it with the Home Secretary's spads, and the GEO has been very clearly working on it. Ultimately, it is a very important point to make with respect to all Departments. They are responsible for dealing with their direct policy issues. It would be wrong for the GEO to seek to replicate that policy work. That is specifically what I do not want. That is why I see GEO working in a hub-and-spoke model whereby we are there to provide advice, but the Departments themselves are responsible for implementing the policy.

Q6 **Chair:** It would be interesting for us to see some of the advice that the GEO had provided. You said that you sat on the economic sub-committee dealing with Covid. How do you think the health issues of BAME people are best represented without you having an input into the health sub-committee? Do you think, when it comes to public sector preparedness and particularly the very serious concerns about elderly people in our care homes, you are also missing from the sub-committee chaired by Michael Gove? Do you think, as the Minister for Women and Equalities, there should be a role for you to sit on more than one of these committees, in order that the GEO's voice can be heard?

**Liz Truss:** I do sit on two committees. I sit on the international committee and on the economic committee. We have been directly in touch with PHE and the Department of Health on the data on ethnic minority issues, specifically in terms of the Covid disease itself. I have asked that we get better data on exactly what is happening on that issue. We get in touch directly with those Departments. Likewise, on the issue about the age effect, those are stats collected by the ONS. I am also working with the Disability Unit in the Cabinet Office to get better data on exactly how disabled people are affected.

There is a balance between sitting on committees and being able to get work done directly with Departments. I feel the economic committee is a very important one. It is going to be really important in terms of the recovery, and one of my concerns is making sure that we do not allow our good record on women in employment to slip back; we need to make sure that women are properly supported as a recovery takes place. On all of those other issues, as they come up, I deal directly with Departments and my officials deal directly with Departments on those.

Q7 **Chair:** Can I ask a specific question about the Coronavirus Act, the temporary legislation and how you fed into the process? I note that the equality impact assessment has not been published. Are you going to publish it? Do you think it should be published? Are you expecting further



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

equality impact assessments to be undertaken whilst the crisis is ongoing?

**Liz Truss:** The assessment was made in conjunction with support from the Government Equalities Office, so we were involved in the composition of that assessment, as we always are. We work to support Government Departments in carrying out their equality impact assessments. It is important to note that it is their responsibility to do that. This is my point about mainstreaming equalities work: it is not the responsibility of the GEO; we can help and support Departments, but it is ultimately their responsibility to do that work.

In terms of publishing that impact assessment, the problem is that, when these types of assessments are routinely published, the people who write them tend to check themselves. There can be a chilling effect on being frank in those assessments if they are then subsequently published. These are internal documents to help inform the Government about how we operate. The more that those documents are published, the more difficult it is for people to be frank in those documents.

Q8 **Chair:** Are we going to see you make an appearance at one of the daily press conferences? It has been really noticeable so far that they have been conducted by men. When is your turn?

**Liz Truss:** The Home Secretary has already made an appearance, as you will be aware, at the daily press conference. There have also been appearances by senior medical officials such as Dr Jenny Harries. You will be aware that women are playing a key part in the response. Thérèse Coffey, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions—

Q9 **Chair:** We have not seen her either though, have we?

**Liz Truss:** She has done a number of media appearances and she is doing an absolutely brilliant job of dealing with the increased number of universal credit claims. I know you previously worked in the Department for Work and Pensions. It is tough to make sure that all of those things happen, and she is doing a fantastic job.

Q10 **Chair:** We are not here to talk about what Thérèse is doing. Are you or Thérèse going to appear at those daily press conferences? There has been one appearance by one woman.

**Liz Truss:** I was about to make a point, which is that I do not like tokenism. I do not like the idea that somebody should just appear at a press conference or in a media interview because they are a woman. They should be doing that and they should be doing the work internally because of the merits of what they are capable of.

Q11 **Chair:** They should not be there just because they are a woman, but you have a remit for elderly people, for the disabled, for those from a BAME background and for the LGBTQ community—that is a massive group of people who are being impacted by Covid-19—and you think it would be



tokenism to appear at one of those press conferences.

**Liz Truss:** I am not saying that at all. What I am saying is the excessive focus on what gender somebody is, rather than what they do, does a disservice to women. I believe that women are as capable as men and that we need more women in politics. There are opportunities out of Covid to do things like make our Parliament more flexible and get more representation. We should be focusing on the right people to present at the press conference.

Q12 **Chair:** Is that not you then? Are you not the right person?

**Liz Truss:** The major issue at the moment is health, and so it is right that the Health Secretary is doing a lot of the press conferences and explaining the specific health issues. Believe me, I am doing a lot of work, as are Ministers right across Government, responding to this crisis. There are important jobs to be done, whether that is working on committees, whether it is producing—

Q13 **Chair:** You told us earlier that you were not keen on sitting on committees.

**Liz Truss:** I said I am keen on sitting on some committees. I draw the line at sitting on all the committees; that is what I am suggesting. Everybody is working extremely hard to deal with this crisis. We have great women in lots of key roles across the Government. We have great BAME people in key roles across this Government. What is important is the best possible response because, ultimately, what women care about, what BAME people care about, what gay people care about is whether we help people stay alive and whether people will have jobs and an economic future after the crisis. That is what is important. An excessive focus on precisely who is appearing at a press conference is the wrong focus.

Q14 **Chair:** Before I bring Nickie in, can I ask a question on that specific point? It is important that we focus both on keeping people alive and that they should have jobs at the end of this crisis. You are described in the media as a hawk. Is it more important that people should have jobs or that they should be kept alive?

**Liz Truss:** First, the most important thing, as it says on our strapline, is that we save lives. That is the No. 1 priority and we will not lift lockdown until we have fulfilled the conditions of the five tests. That is incredibly important. Of course, at the same time, it is right that we prepare for the lifting of lockdown and make sure that it has the minimum economic damage that we can deliver. What I am very concerned about is to make sure that minority groups and women do not lose out as we lift that lockdown.

We have seen a change in culture during this lockdown. It is clearly incredibly tough for many families across the country, and we have discussed concerns about issues like domestic violence, but there are also some positives. In terms of increased flexibility of working, a lot of



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

employers who previously said people could not work from home are now finding that they can absolutely deliver from home. We should take the opportunity to capitalise on some of those cultural changes that have happened to make it easier for people balancing family and career to work from home, to make it more flexible and to challenge the culture of presenteeism, which has been very alive in business and has also been very alive in politics. Some of the changes we are seeing in Parliament are positive. The GEO and also the Select Committee can have a role in considering how we use some of the changes that have happened as a result of Covid to change our working culture.

**Q15** **Nickie Aiken:** Thank you, Secretary of State, and I absolutely endorse what you said earlier about the whole-of-Government approach to women and equalities work. You are right that it has to be across the whole of the Government and not just one Department. I was really interested to hear what you were saying about the Safe To Be Me campaign, which I absolutely welcome, and the work on international LGBT rights. Obviously, we are part of the Commonwealth, and many countries, particularly in Africa, do outlaw homosexuality. Through your work, the international conference and this whole agenda, how are you liaising with Commonwealth countries and trying to get them to understand the importance of LGBT rights?

**Liz Truss:** That is one of the key purposes of the conference. We want to invite those leaders and representatives to London—we are working very closely with DFID and the Foreign Office on this—to make the case for the elimination of persecution of gay people in those countries. We are making significant progress. Baroness Berridge is leading on this work and she has already had some very positive conversations with Commonwealth nations. The UK really has a very strong role to play. We are a great country in terms of our record on human rights and LGBT rights. This is about bringing other countries with us, showing leadership and showing what can be achieved. That is very much the aim of the conference.

As I have said, we are trying to get a new date at the moment. I hope that we will be able to have the conference early next year so that we can make progress on this really important agenda. Nick Herbert, who is our lead on the conference, has already been doing a lot of outreach work around the world. As I mentioned, I did an event with him in Tokyo where we specifically talked about this issue. The more that we can build up support, the better. To me, this is not a name-and-shame campaign; it is much more about trying to get consensus and bringing those countries with us so we can achieve more together.

**Q16** **Nickie Aiken:** Wearing your international trade hat, would you see there being issues with us setting up trade agreements with countries, particularly Commonwealth countries, that were not adhering to our views on LGBT rights?



**Liz Truss:** The way I see it—and I would say the same about issues like climate change—is that we should seek to have tracks dealing with issues of climate change and issues of LGBT rights, but we should treat those separately from trade agreements. We already trade with most countries in the world anyway, on WTO terms. As a member of the WTO, we have to. What trade agreements are really about is mutually lowering barriers and enabling more trade between our countries. That trade leads to economic development in those nations, which can often have a positive effect on attitudes to LGBT rights and to women's rights.

Another issue I am looking at is women in trade. If I take the example of Rwanda, 80% of cross-border trade is conducted by women running small businesses, so what I do not want to do is hold back potential benefits for some of the poorest people in the world because we are seeking agreement with their Governments on LGBT rights. We need a twin-track approach of encouraging economic development at the same time as working closely with those nations to move in the right direction on LGBT rights.

I take a similar approach to climate change. We are hosting the COP 26 conference. Yes, it is important that we seek global agreement, but trade is a good thing in itself and will actually improve outcomes for people in those countries. The evidence is that trade often benefits the poorest in society most. It benefits women in particular, particularly in Africa, and therefore we should not hold back our trade agreements because we are also seeking agreements elsewhere.

Q17 **Nicola Richards:** Thank you, Secretary of State, for joining us today. Going back to talking about the coronavirus pandemic, has the Government made any assessment of why more men are dying from the virus than women?

**Liz Truss:** We do collect data at present on men and women, and that is already being collected by the ONS and Public Health England. We do not know the full reasons, but it is currently being investigated by the Department of Health and Social Care. As I said earlier, we are also looking for that other data, specifically on BAME and the impact of the disease on the disabled as well. It is fair to say that, across the board, we are working hard to find out more about Covid-19, but it is a relatively new disease and a lot more work needs to be done.

Q18 **Nicola Richards:** If the Government are tracking the number of deaths and infections by gender, which I think is what you have just said, do you know what has been done with this information so far?

**Liz Truss:** The information has been published in its broadest form. We are looking at getting the data in a more useable format at the moment and, as you rightly point out, just finding out why it is.

Q19 **Nicola Richards:** Women make up a large majority of the health and social care workforce and are, as such, likely to be at much greater risk



of exposure to coronavirus. What is your role in understanding the potential differential effects of the virus on women as well?

**Liz Truss:** First of all, people in the health service are doing a fantastic job, and you are right that the majority of them are women. It is incredibly tough; people are working round the clock and we have huge respect for what they are doing. We are doing all we can to get the necessary PPE and make sure that they have the necessary protection. Huge applause for the fantastic work those individuals are doing in our health service and in all sorts of other jobs on the front line, whether it is in care homes or supermarkets. We have all been very humbled and impressed, really, by the huge capacity of people to go out and work in these really difficult conditions.

We are doing all we can through the Ministry of Local Government and the Department of Health, to support the most vulnerable and to make sure that people have the right personal protection. Of course, as I mentioned earlier, we have supported Departments in carrying out equality impact assessments and making sure that, where possible, we really are helping the most vulnerable in those situations. You are certainly right: 77% of the NHS workforce is female, so that is, of course, an issue of particular concern.

Q20 **Nicola Richards:** Are you able to tell me any steps that you have taken directly so far to protect women in particular?

**Liz Truss:** The way I look at this—this is what I was saying earlier—is that the Department of Health and Social Care is the responsible Department for making sure that they protect everybody who is working for the health service. Of course, a disproportionate number of those are female, as you rightly point out, but the same protection is required, regardless of what gender you are. It is just making sure that everybody has that protective equipment. That is what the Department of Health is absolutely making sure is happening every day during this crisis.

Q21 **Nickie Aiken:** Looking at the economic impact on women in particular, though I know it affects many others, women are very much involved in the care industry. As you say, 77% of NHS staff are women, and there are retail staff. There is a huge economic impact for women because of the Covid-19 crisis. What have you been doing, Secretary of State, working with the DWP, in particular, and other Departments, to really help and understand the economic impact on women during the pandemic?

**Liz Truss:** You are right that these sectors, which are absolutely critical to the Covid response, have large female workforces. I go back to the point I made earlier: the issues that are affecting them are affecting everybody, and that is why we are working so hard to make sure they have the protection and the support to continue with their jobs.

There are broader questions as we emerge from this crisis. First of all, how do we help women stay in roles? Much of recent employment is



women gaining employment; how do we make sure that happens? How do we help women with start-up businesses and new businesses? Women are twice as likely to run tech businesses as they are to run bricks-and-mortar businesses. One thing we know is that technology is actually one of the sectors that has been less likely to be affected by the lockdown due to the fact that people are able to work from home, and so on. How do we support women in those types of businesses? How do we rectify the fact that there are fewer women entrepreneurs than male entrepreneurs?

Those are issues that we are going to be looking at as we go into the recovery phase, as well as the whole issue of occupational segregation. Why do we have a gender pay gap in this country? It is not because employers are paying women less than men for the same job. They are not. That is against the law. It is because we have occupational segregation; women have tended to go into particular types of careers and men have tended to go into other types of careers. How can we make sure that people have opportunities to go into every type of career and we do not have those levels of segregation, at least not by bias, if you like? It should be by the choice of people taking up those jobs.

Those are all questions for the future of our economy. It is very important that, as we leave the immediate Covid crisis, we look at how we can get women into jobs with high productivity and high wages, and how we can make sure that people are properly rewarded for the work they do.

**Q22** **Nickie Aiken:** You mentioned that it is against the law to pay women differently to men doing the same job, but we have had too many examples, even in recent months, where women have discovered that they are being paid less than men in the same job. What can we do to ensure that that does not happen? How can we ensure that, particularly now, during this pandemic, companies are held to account and that they do their own audits to ensure that women and men are being paid the same for the same job?

**Liz Truss:** You are absolutely right that this is against the law and it is absolutely the responsibility of companies to make sure that they are paying people correctly. It is something that we are looking at as part of the work that we are doing on the gender pay gap, to make sure that we have the proper enforcement processes in place. In fact, I am speaking to BEIS Ministers about how we do that because I want that type of work to be mainstreamed into the overall contact that we have with business.

We are working very closely with business during this crisis. Many businesses responded really well. Look at the way the supermarkets have responded in terms of helping key workers shop at particular times and making sure that they are getting deliveries out to people who are being shielded. We also need to work with companies as we come out of the Covid crisis to make sure that they are treating people fairly and also that we are building up those high-productivity jobs of the future, and making sure that those jobs are accessible to women and ethnic minorities. As I



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

said earlier, a large cause of the gender pay gap is occupational segregation. There are fewer women in STEM jobs. Fewer girls studying those subjects ultimately leads to those issues in the future.

There is an opportunity here for a reset, as we have had a lot of change in culture in the way people work. There is also occupational segregation with respect to part-time work. The full-time gender pay gap is a lot lower than the part-time gender pay gap and there are going to be fewer excuses for employers to claim that people cannot work flexibly or part-time in jobs now because people have seen it work. I have had a lot of employers, who I have been doing roundtables with, saying to me, "Actually, we are finding that people are more productive when they are able to control their own timetable and work from home". Who knew? It has been an eye-opening moment for many employers on this.

**Q23** **Nickie Aiken:** Great. Finally, obviously the gender pay gap is a concern for you; it is obvious from what you have said to us today. What have you done to ensure that you can be confident that there is not a gender pay gap in your own Department?

**Liz Truss:** The GEO, as I have said, is making various reforms. We are moving the Department under one roof at the Cabinet Office. We in fact have a strong female leadership team at GEO.

In the Department for International Trade, we have a female Permanent Secretary, but I would also like to see more female leadership at the next level down in the Department for International Trade, and we are looking at how we can promote more women into the Department.

**Q24** **Nickie Aiken:** Are you confident that they are being paid what a man would be paid if they were doing the same job?

**Liz Truss:** Yes. This is the issue for many organisations. It is the distribution of women around the organisation. We have more women in junior ranks but not enough in senior ranks. That is another reason for the gender pay gap, along with occupational segregation, as well as, obviously, the big issue around having children and the so-called child penalty. We really need a culture change towards flexible working and being able to work more flexibly, and we should not miss the opportunity to implement that in the workplace. For example, the Department for International Trade and the GEO both went 100% to home-working four weeks ago, before the lockdown was put in place, and it has worked very well for us. Government Departments can learn from that.

**Q25** **Chair:** Following up on Nickie's question, what have you done? You have been at the Department for International Trade since last July. What specific measures have you introduced there to improve the gender pay gap at that Department? Quite apart from the home-working that has been going on over the last four weeks, have you yet done enough?

**Liz Truss:** I work closely with the Permanent Secretary. She is responsible for running the Department and she is in fact the gender



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

champion across Government, so has done a lot of work to promote flexible working. I am saying that now we can achieve a real step change in the way we implement that in DIT that perhaps we were not able to before.

**Q26 Chair:** As the gender champion across Government, as she is, and as Minister for Women and Equalities, as you are, were you embarrassed when the Department for International Trade figures came out to show that the gender pay gap had got worse?

**Liz Truss:** Some of these figures can be a lag effect of employment decisions made in the past. If you think about it, it is about change over time. I have made it clear to my Permanent Secretary that I want to see more females at senior positions within the Department.

**Q27 Kim Johnson:** Do you agree with Citizens Advice and others that statutory sick pay should be very substantially increased? Do the Government have any plans to increase SSP? What are your thoughts on universal basic income?

**Liz Truss:** We have made statutory sick pay available from day one, which was a change since the Covid crisis, and we have also put more money into universal credit. We have raised the local housing allowance as well. We have made significant changes to the benefit system to support people during the Covid crisis.

I do not support the idea of a universal basic income. It has been tried in other countries around the world. It has not been effective. The system of universal credit, where there is a single benefit rather than six different benefits that came before, which is tapered off as you do more hours or work more, has been shown to be very effective. All plaudits to the DWP for implementing it so successfully during the Covid crisis. I certainly do not support a universal basic income.

**Q28 Kim Johnson:** There is still a time lag in people accessing universal credit, and Matt Hancock has said that he would struggle surviving on £95 per week. What are your thoughts on that?

**Liz Truss:** My thoughts are that the team at the DWP has done a fantastic job in processing so many new claims. The system is working well and people are getting access to the support we need. This is an unprecedented international crisis and, if you look at the way that the UK benefit system has supported people in comparison to what has happened around the world, we actually have a record to be proud of there.

**Q29 Chair:** Is there a case for universal credit to be split in the case of households where somebody is a victim of domestic abuse?

**Liz Truss:** That is an interesting question. We have already launched the campaign on domestic abuse and we certainly need to make sure that domestic abuse victims are protected. I have not considered that specific



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

issue about universal credit. I understand it can be paid to a particular partner if there are issues, but I am happy to look at that further.

**Q30 Alex Davies-Jones:** Thank you, Secretary of State. We know that the Government's advice during this pandemic has been, "Stay home, save lives". Tragically, for so many women, staying at home has not saved their lives, and we have seen tens of women murdered through domestic violence at the hands of their partner during this pandemic. What strategy was put in place to protect people who do not feel safe in their own homes during this lockdown?

**Liz Truss:** First of all, we recognised straightaway that this was one of the major issues with the lockdown: that it would put domestic violence victims at potentially more risk of abuse. That is why we have been very clear from the start that if you are a victim of domestic abuse, the rules about lockdown and the "stay at home" message does not apply and you should leave that home if you are able to. We have also launched the campaign and the national domestic abuse helpline number, which is 0808 2000 247, and people should ring that with a view to getting the help they need.

We are extremely worried about this problem. We have launched the You Are Not Alone campaign to help people get the support that they need. Be absolutely clear: the rules of lockdown that you are talking about do not apply if you are in a domestic abuse situation. You should absolutely be able to leave a property where you are facing domestic abuse.

**Q31 Alex Davies-Jones:** Before all this began and the lockdown started, many Members of the House, charities and third-sector people were calling for cross-party talks to ensure that a strategy was put in place. Did this happen? When did you first have these conversations with the Home Secretary, for example, and third-sector charities to support people in this situation?

**Liz Truss:** These conversations took place before the lockdown. We were aware that one of the major issues in a lockdown situation would be domestic violence and the threat of domestic violence. Those plans were immediately worked on, particularly by the Home Office, but by other Departments as well. It was a conversation that was held around Government. Of course, the Home Office is working with domestic violence charities like Refuge and also with local authorities to make sure the victims of domestic violence have somewhere to go and have the support they need. This has certainly been something that all Government Ministers have been very aware of as a really major issue. We have listened to what people in Parliament have said about this issue.

**Q32 Alex Davies-Jones:** Do you ask for regular updates on this from other Departments? What progress has been made by the different Departments to make sure that women are kept safe? Who, other than the Home Secretary, have you been speaking to on this?



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Liz Truss:** We keep regular updates in terms of the figures from the Home Secretary. I have also had discussions with my local police chief about the issues affecting Norfolk on this. We are working really hard as a Government. I know that Robert Jenrick at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is also working on this issue and making sure people have the support. The key point about the You Are Not Alone campaign is really raising awareness amongst victims that there are people on their side, that they should call the helpline and that if people are in desperate need they should call 999 and press 55, if they are not able to speak, to get that support.

The key thing is getting those victims to come forward. I know that the police are doing a lot of work trying to identify where there may be potential issues. This is really connected with the issues of children not coming into school as well and making sure that those families are getting the advice and support that they need. It really is a cross-Government effort and we are all very concerned about it. It has been discussed at a number of Cabinet meetings, for example. I will get you the exact details, but there have been discussions on this.

Q33 **Alex Davies-Jones:** You have been involved in those discussions.

**Liz Truss:** Yes, absolutely.

Q34 **Alex Davies-Jones:** How confident are you that if a woman phoned the helpline, she would be given help and she would be able to access that support if she needed to flee her home?

**Liz Truss:** I am very confident.

Q35 **Alex Davies-Jones:** You are very confident. We have been told that currently 60% of women are being turned away from Refuge and that refuge workers and volunteers are not classed as essential workers during this crisis. Were you aware of that? What conversations have you had with refuges and to support these people when they are fleeing their homes?

**Liz Truss:** I was not aware that refuge workers were not classified as key workers and I will certainly look into that. I have been in touch with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which has assured me that when people ring that helpline accommodation will be found for those people, and they are looking at all possible options for that accommodation.

Q36 **Alex Davies-Jones:** We are aware that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has been asked to help with emergency accommodation and have emergency accommodation providers offering them support. What conversations have you had with Robert Jenrick, to ensure that emergency accommodation is available for these women fleeing their homes?



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Liz Truss:** As I have said, I have been in touch with the Department and it has assured me that that is absolutely happening when that number gets called. I can absolutely go and look at data on exactly what has happened, but I have been assured that that will be in place.

Q37 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you, Secretary of State. My question was particularly about elder abuse and the fact that a lot of centres in local authorities have been closed, particularly dementia hubs. Looking after somebody with dementia 24/7 in a lockdown situation can increase the propensity for elder abuse. What are your thoughts on that, and what can be done to look at the issues in terms of elder abuse?

**Liz Truss:** Thank you very much for that. We do have specific policies in place for the elderly in terms of the additional shielding that is being provided and the additional support from local authorities. In terms of cases of elder abuse, that is something I can certainly look into, but I do not have any data on that at the moment.

Q38 **Nickie Aiken:** Obviously, in crises like this, Governments, local authorities and businesses learn how to do things better, or they are educated in how they go forward. What have you and your Department discovered or learned from this pandemic so far in the case of domestic abuse and our response to it that could now be directed towards the Domestic Abuse Bill or could be addressed in the forthcoming Domestic Abuse Bill?

**Liz Truss:** It is a very good question about what we have learned. It is quite early on in terms of monitoring those cases to be able to make any definitive comments, though it certainly is something that we will be looking at. More broadly there are all kinds of different things we can learn about how Government can operate more digitally that we can certainly put in place for the future. It has opened up new ways of doing things.

In this time of lockdown, it can be difficult to get information about where domestic abuse is occurring, and I know that the police are looking at different ideas, whether that is working more closely with schools and other authorities to get more early warning indicators. That is something that we will certainly look at.

To be clear to the Committee, the whole Government are pretty much 24/7 on supporting people during the Covid crisis. There are an awful lot of aspects of that. Necessarily, we have had to move fast to do things like put extra funding in, launch campaigns and make sure that those key operational parts of our response are in place. As we move forward, there will be more time for data-gathering and analysis. That is why I have asked for this data, but we are at the early stages of doing that. The first phase was very much all hands to the pump, making sure that we have the core in place to save lives but also to protect people in their homes from domestic violence and keeping the economy going as best we can,



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

because it is of course really important that we keep people in jobs through and after the crisis.

Inevitably some of that analytical work will take a bit longer, but we will certainly be looking at that at the GEO, in terms of what we can learn about how we have operated in this crisis and what we can do in future.

**Q39 Peter Gibson:** Good morning, Secretary of State. We have seen changes in the Coronavirus Bill to the care obligations of local authorities. Could you please explain to us how that is being monitored and what additional resources are being given to local government to deal with social care, particularly for those isolated disabled people who were receiving that care at the time the Bill was introduced?

**Liz Truss:** The reason that we had to make those changes in the Coronavirus Bill was to give local authorities the flexibility to prioritise those most in need. We have given additional resources to local authorities to do that.

In terms of the feedback we are getting from local authorities, that is something we will receive over time, but there are clear safeguards in place to make sure professionals are administering these arrangements and that they happen in the right way. I have not yet seen any data out of that work.

**Q40 Peter Gibson:** Is there any monitoring going on at this point in time?

**Liz Truss:** There will be monitoring by the individual local authorities taking place.

**Q41 Peter Gibson:** There were also changes in the Coronavirus Bill in respect of mental health and sectioning. Is the assessment of Government at this stage that they were necessary? How extensively are they being used and at what time will they be changed back?

**Liz Truss:** We are very clear that these were temporary measures to deal with the immediate crisis and we will look at changing those temporary measures when the time is right. They are very much temporary. They are not permanent. Monitoring that is the responsibility of the Department of Health. I would suggest to you that it is probably a fairly early stage for getting that data and analysis, but certainly it is something we can look at with the Department of Health.

**Q42 Peter Gibson:** Do you think they were essential?

**Liz Truss:** The answer is it is too early to say. We are operating in real time at the moment, with day-to-day decisions being made. Once we are through the most difficult part of the crisis, that will be the time when we can analyse those flexibilities.

Just to be clear about these flexibilities, they do not have to be used. In the case of care work, we were giving health authorities and local government the decision-making power to use those flexibilities if they



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

have to. They may not have to use them, and it would be good if they did not have to use them, but it was right that we made sure that everything was in place to run the best possible operation, with the ultimate objective of saving lives at this really difficult time. We talked a bit earlier about the disease. The fact is the disease is not fully understood, it is not fully predictable and that, inevitably, means that you are going to have to put in place contingencies that do not necessarily get used. Rather than not having those contingencies in place first, it is important to be able to have that flexibility should it be needed. I am saying that even if it was not used, it still might have been the right thing to do to put it in place.

Q43 **Peter Gibson:** What do you see as your role during the pandemic in respect of those people who are elderly or disabled?

**Liz Truss:** Of course, I work on equalities policy for the disabled, but we also have the Disability Unit in the Cabinet Office and the DWP has specific responsibility for disabled people. I see my role as making sure that disabled people are not being discriminated against during the crisis and that we are specifically protecting them in terms of saving lives, in terms of protecting them during the lockdown, and in terms of the recovery, so making sure that disabled people are a full part of the economic recovery and do not get left behind in the same way that that is true of disadvantaged groups across society. It is important to recognise, though, that the implementation of those policies rests with the relevant Departments, but I see my role as having an overview of that.

Q44 **Peter Gibson:** Many people who have protected characteristics that fall within your remit are already isolated. I am thinking particularly here of people who have communication difficulties, such as the deaf and the blind. In terms of its communication, are the Government doing enough to get the coronavirus messages through to those people? Is enough also being done for people who speak different languages, to ensure that the coronavirus messages are reaching those communities where people speak languages other than English?

**Liz Truss:** In terms of messages to people with disabilities, the Disability Unit has done work to make sure that we have appropriate sign language, for example, and that we have appropriate communications for people with disabilities on the core coronavirus message. That is the responsibility of the Cabinet Office. In terms of the message to wider communities, that really lies with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, but I know that they are working very hard to make sure that the appropriate language is used to communicate with those communities. It is a cross-Government effort to make sure that we communicate with everybody.

Q45 **Peter Gibson:** Have you done any assessment of whether those messages are actually reaching those people at this particular time?

**Liz Truss:** We definitely have looked at whether those messages are going out, and they certainly are. In terms of audience reception, that



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

will be a matter for the head of communications. I am certainly happy to look at that. We are doing general research on how the messages have got across to the public, so I will certainly have to look at that issue specifically.

**Q46 Peter Gibson:** I would like to touch on the issue of domestic violence in LGBTQ communities. We appear to have had a spike in reported cases there. What specifically are you doing to monitor that?

**Liz Truss:** That is being monitored alongside the overall work on domestic violence by the Home Office.

**Q47 Peter Gibson:** Does that particular community require a different messaging from the normal domestic violence messaging that has been coming out from the Government?

**Liz Truss:** That is an interesting question. Our overall domestic violence messaging is very inclusive; that is the way I would put it.

**Q48 Chair:** Can I just follow up on one of Peter's questions about the accessibility of information, and particularly the letter from the PM which went to many households, though not all? I am sure, like me, you have had constituents complain they have not received it. That was not particularly accessible for those who have learning difficulties or for those with visual impairment. Are there any plans to have a more easily accessible or perhaps an easy-read version of that go out?

**Liz Truss:** The answer is I do not know. I would be happy to look into that. There have been, as I say, messages going out through various channels, but probably not that specific message.

**Q49 Sara Britcliffe:** I would just like to go back to Peter's point and ask whether you share the concerns of disability organisations that the BMA's guidelines for healthcare professionals faced with difficult decisions about who to treat in intensive care could result in discrimination against disabled and elderly people?

**Liz Truss:** We are very clear there should be no discrimination. That is a decision for individuals and their families, and we have been very clear about that.

**Q50 Sara Britcliffe:** What can the Government do to ensure that this does not happen?

**Liz Truss:** We need to rely on our medical professionals to make sure that is implemented correctly.

**Q51 Sara Britcliffe:** Have you a role to play in this? Have you been speaking with the Health Secretary about this? As you can imagine, the BMA's guidelines can put worry in people's minds, especially when they speak of higher survival probability and say that people may be denied intensive care.



**Liz Truss:** The work that the Department of Health has done to increase capacity in the system has meant that we are able to provide everybody with care who needs it, and that is absolutely right. In terms of specific conversations, I am aware of the general issue, but I have not specifically discussed that with the Health Secretary because I am confident that the advice is very clear that there should be no discrimination.

Q52 **Kate Osborne:** Good morning, Secretary of State. I want to focus my questions on the LGBT+ community. The LGBT Foundation, and other organisations such as Stonewall, have been conducting research on the impact of Covid-19 on the LGBT+ community, and they have suggested that the virus may be disproportionately affecting groups such as LGBT+ people, who already experience poorer outcomes in healthcare. Can you please tell us how you have been engaging with LGBT stakeholders? Are there specific actions that the Government can and should take?

**Liz Truss:** In terms of the data, I would be very interested to see the data you have had; we can consider that in the Government Equalities Office. During the crisis I have made sure that we have the proper LGBT healthcare advisor in place. I am sure Helen Cook can give you a bit more detail about that, if I hand over to her, but we have been involved with the Department of Health to make sure that that LGBT advice is specifically in place so that LGBT people are not put in a difficult position because of this crisis. Helen, can I bring you in on that?

**Helen Cook:** Yes, that is exactly right. We of course have the healthcare advisor, Dr Michael Brady, and it is very good news that we are able to keep on funding him; he will be in place for another year now. He is working specifically on this issue.

I was not aware of specific data around different health outcomes for LGBT people, so we would be really interested to see that, but that work is certainly going on.

**Liz Truss:** As Helen said, just as the extent of the coronavirus crisis was becoming clear we made that decision to fund that position from the GEO budget because we thought it was a really important priority early on. Kate, I can commit to you that I am happy to speak to LGBTQ stakeholders on this specific issue following this Committee meeting. I am very happy to talk to them in more detail.

Q53 **Kate Osborne:** Thank you, Secretary of State. That commitment is very welcome. Can I move on to talk about social isolation? This can have a greater impact on LGBT people due to their circumstances and experiences, because LGBT people are more likely to be socially isolated and therefore may not have the same networks to rely on if they feel ill and, as Peter has mentioned, are also at risk of domestic violence. What support is being offered specifically around these issues?

**Liz Truss:** I know that my Department is working very closely with LGBT stakeholders on this and we are also working with the Ministry of



Housing, Communities and Local Government. This goes back to my original point about making sure everybody across a community is protected. Everybody has been affected. There are some people in particularly vulnerable positions: some people are being shielded so are even more isolated than others. We are doing everything we can to make sure people get that support, regardless of their sexuality, their gender, their age or their disability. We are working as a Government to make sure everybody has that support.

**Q54** **Kate Osborne:** The LGBT sector is beginning to show that increasing numbers of LGBT people are seeking support from specialist organisations, often charities, that are already coming under an awful lot of strain in the situation that we are in. Again, can I ask what support you can offer to these organisations and charities that LGBT people rely on so much?

**Liz Truss:** You will be aware that an announcement was made by the Chancellor and the Culture Secretary about providing an overall £750 million to the charitable sector to help them do the work. LGBT charities are obviously part of that. If there are any issues in those charities accessing that funding, they should get in touch with me and we can obviously push that from the GEO.

**Q55** **Kim Johnson:** There has been lots of coverage recently about the high number of deaths of black people as a result of Covid-19; the first 10 doctors who died were from the BAME community. How concerned are you about these high levels of deaths?

**Liz Truss:** I am very concerned to hear these reports. I have had discussions with the Race Disparity Unit, the Chief Medical Officer and Public Health England about really establishing what the data is showing us about the impact on BAME communities of this virus. We have already started that work. We do not yet have the data to really show us exactly what the situation is or why the situation has come about, but it is something we are certainly working on.

**Q56** **Kim Johnson:** Robert Jenrick mentioned recently that Downing Street was undertaking an investigation. Can you say a little bit about that and what role the GEO will play in it?

**Liz Truss:** That is exactly what I was talking about with that work that is taking place. We are a key part of that, really as part of the Equalities Hub, which encompasses GEO, the Race Disparity Unit and the Disabilities Unit, together with Public Health England and the Chief Medical Officer.

**Q57** **Kim Johnson:** You just mentioned that there is an issue in terms of how information is collated and the fact that there does not appear to be a consistent process in gathering ethnicity data. Will that be happening now and can you tell me whether death certificates will start to identify ethnicity?



**Liz Truss:** It is certainly something that I have identified at GEO and the Equalities Hub overall: we do not have strong enough data, and we also need more staff who are specialists in data gathering and research. That is something I am working on with Theo Agnew, to make sure that we have a really strong set of data, of course about race, gender and LGBT status, but also on other issues such as geography and background and how we understand them across the piece so that we can really see the impact of policies overall. We kicked that off some time ago. Covid has made that even more important for these specific issues around health.

In terms of the death certificates, I believe that is being looked at, but certainly it is better to have more data so that we fully understand this issue.

The way I see it is that there are three stages to this. There is the impact of the disease on specific communities across Britain, then there is the impact of the lockdown on specific communities, and then there is also how we see the recovery working for people across the UK. The GEO is involved in all three of those stages. It is really important that we do not forget the recovery part. How are we going to make sure that the economic effects are not disproportionately difficult for people from BAME backgrounds? When we are looking at ending the lockdown and economic recovery and which parts of the economy open first, we need to be looking at the impact on everybody across the UK, making sure people have equal opportunities and making sure people are not discriminated against.

I want better data and I have asked for better data on all three of those things. We have some data, but it is patchy and it certainly needs to be better. This is the way I see the Equalities Unit working in future, as much more of a central hub with much better data-sharing with Departments, so that we have that data much quicker as things move through.

Q58 **Kim Johnson:** We find that working-class black women with underlying health conditions due to socioeconomic reasons are more likely to work in the care sector. What is being done to risk-assess these vulnerable workers and ensure they are shielded?

**Liz Truss:** We are making sure that we have proper protection for everybody in the care sector, but your point is really the point I was making earlier, which is that we need to be looking at backgrounds, safer economic status and geography as well as race, gender and sexuality so that we have a full picture. Particular geographical locations or particular groups can often be hard hit. Certainly when we are looking at the economic recovery we need to make sure that it is part of our agenda of levelling up Britain, and we are not finding that places already relatively suffering economically end up suffering more as a result of the recovery. We need to make sure that we are supporting people right across the country, and we are supporting people of all backgrounds and all ethnicities.



Q59 **Kim Johnson:** What role do you think unconscious bias play in these high rates of deaths for black people?

**Liz Truss:** That is a very hard question to answer before we have any data; we do not know the reasons. The first point is about getting the proper data and then really understanding the reasons. As I say, we need a fuller understanding of the disease itself and how it operates to get to the bottom of that.

Q60 **Kim Johnson:** Lastly, what is your opinion about compensation for the families of those people who have died due to the lack of protection for key workers?

**Liz Truss:** We do have protection in place for key workers and we are making sure that we can get that protection to people. Our focus now should be on making sure people are properly protected.

Q61 **Peter Gibson:** Secretary of State, you referred to the charity packages that have been announced by the Chancellor, and some of those monies have been allocated to domestic violence charities. Could you take away and return to us on, or highlight to your colleagues, the apparent difficulties that charities are having in accessing that? There seems to be some confusion as to whether the Home Office or MHCLG are dealing with that, and how individual refugees can access those funds through that. Could you take that away, please?

**Liz Truss:** I am very happy to look at that, yes.

Q62 **Alex Davies-Jones:** Secretary of State, my question follows on from Kim's questioning regarding unconscious bias and the disproportionate number of deaths in the BAME community as a result of coronavirus. Yesterday the Welsh Health Minister, Vaughan Gething, announced there would be an inquiry in Wales into why this is happening and why the BAME community seem to be so disproportionately impacted. Will the same be happening in England?

**Liz Truss:** As I have said, we are already launching work with the Race Disparity Unit, the CMO and Public Health England on precisely this issue, to understand first of all what the data is and then understand why it is the case.

Q63 **Angela Crawley:** Thank you, Secretary of State. Obviously, this is a difficult time for many people and the long-term impact or the economic impact will be significant. As Minister for Women and Equalities, how do you think this pandemic has affected Government's strategic equality objectives and have those priorities shifted? How much has that impacted on the Government Equalities Office's day-to-day work and focus?

**Liz Truss:** First of all, alongside the work that the Government Equalities Office is doing to support Departments with equality assessments and some of the issues we have been talking about already—data-gathering and better analysis—Government Equalities Office staff have also been assisting other Departments. So we have had some of our team



supporting the Department of Health, some of our team supporting the Foreign Office to get people repatriated, and some supporting press inquiries—all kinds of things. Across Government all hands are to the pump dealing with this really unprecedented crisis and really making sure that we are saving lives as we need to at this difficult time. I just wanted to make clear that the Government Equalities Office is focused on supporting the wider Government effort along with its key duties.

I already said that one of my focuses of policy as we exit this immediate crisis was economic empowerment. It becomes increasingly important, because of the difficult economic position the country will be in, that we make sure that people are able to access high-quality jobs and that businesses have opportunities; the Chancellor recently announced a package to support tech industries, in which women are actually disproportionately under-represented in terms of business ownership. Making sure that that recovery package and the way that we exit lockdown benefits everybody, regardless of your gender, your ethnicity or your background, is going to be incredibly important.

The way I would put it is that what was a long-term agenda in terms of economic empowerment for women has become a lot more urgent, and we are now looking at that with respect to the economic recovery post-Covid.

**Q64** **Angela Crawley:** On that point about economic empowerment, the Government made the decision to suspend gender pay gap recording and enforcement for a large number of employers. Are you personally comfortable with this decision? Why not merely extend the deadline rather than stop the recording of the gender pay gap?

**Liz Truss:** Across the board we have made sure that companies are not facing additional burdens to their core business, because our No.1 priority is keeping those companies going and keeping people in work. If we end up in a situation where people are being laid off, whether they are women or BAME people, because companies could not stay afloat, that, to me, is a big problem. Of course, dealing with the gender pay gap is important, but the most important thing is that we keep people in employment in the first place and we keep the economy going because, without that, and without people having jobs, we will be in serious trouble. We have made various allowances in terms of reporting of data, in terms of some of the rules and regulations for companies, to allow them to focus on that core business. That is why it is a very important priority as we exit lockdown to make sure that we are supporting companies, keeping staff employed and re-employing people. That should be where their priority is focused.

As to your question about extending the deadline, the issue is that we do not know quite how long this will last. We do not know in exactly what form it will last, so it is very difficult to say, "We are extending the deadline for X or Y period". It is better to pause it while we focus on this emergency situation of keeping our economy going and keeping people in



jobs and then re-look at it once we are through the immediate crisis. As I say, the focus at GEO is going to be making sure that women are not disadvantaged in the course of the recovery, that BAME people are not disadvantaged in the course of the recovery and that nobody is disadvantaged in the course of recovery. That is going to take all of our energy and that is going to take all of the energy of companies as well.

**Q65** **Angela Crawley:** You have stressed the importance of data. Given the disproportionate impact and the effect it will have on many women during this pandemic, is it not particularly important to have gender pay gap data? Even if it had been delayed, would that not have been more beneficial to the Government in the long term? Are you not concerned about the blanket suspension of enforcement and the message that sends: that you are not taking the gender pay gap seriously?

**Liz Truss:** The very clear message we are sending to companies is that the No.1 priority is that they stay in business and that they keep people employed. It is incredibly important to recognise that this is a national and international crisis that we are dealing with. This is not business as usual and we want companies to be able to focus on that core job. I speak to lots of businesses in my role as GEO Minister but also as Trade Secretary. Businesses are under severe pressure at the moment, and we need to recognise that. It is right that their focus at the moment is on keeping their business going and making sure they retain those jobs. We will absolutely focus on the issue of differentials in pay and occupational segregation, which I was discussing earlier, in due course. At the moment it is all hands to the pump, and that is the message we want to give to companies.

**Q66** **Angela Crawley:** I have one more question, specifically on universal basic income. You mentioned that other countries had tried this and it had not been effective. Are you aware that many of the countries that have tried this tried it on a regional basis and it was understood that, while aspects of this had varying degrees of success, it would need to be applied nationally to have any impact? Could you consider the UK to be the first country in which they could roll this out nationally and would you consider universal basic income as a possibility for the UK to roll out in the long term to mitigate against the impact of this pandemic?

**Liz Truss:** We have introduced emergency measures, such as the furlough scheme and the addition to universal credit during the crisis, to help us get through the crisis. We should not confuse economic measures that we put in place during the crisis for the future of our economy. I am against universal basic income in principle because it reduces the incentives for people to go to work. Universal credit has been incredibly successful because it helps people get their hours up and makes sure that the work always pays. Where it has been tried, universal basic income has not delivered that and has instead resulted in economic problems.

At the heart of this, why is it that we are able to pay for the furlough scheme? Why are we able to pay for the universal credit system? The



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

answer is we have businesses out there who are trading, who are making money for our country, which is why we can afford public services to pay for things. If we damage that system by diluting the incentive to go into work then, ultimately, we will all pay the cost of that.

**Q67 Sara Britcliffe:** At the beginning you mentioned the Gender Recognition Act and stated that we would see progress in the summer on this. Can you just elaborate on what progress you are talking about there, please?

**Liz Truss:** Before the summer we will make an announcement on our response to the consultation and how we are going to proceed on the Gender Recognition Act. That is before the summer recess.

**Q68 Sara Britcliffe:** Will the pandemic further delay other important equality objectives too?

**Liz Truss:** In terms of the Gender Recognition Act we have obviously had a lot of work to do. We have now completed that work, so we want to get on with announcing that so that transgender adults can have security and know that they have the ability to live their lives freely, at the same time making sure that we protect single-sex spaces and protecting under-18s from making irreversible decisions. That has not been delayed by the crisis. Obviously, it has been difficult over the last few weeks, when the entire Government's energy has been focused on Covid and Parliament has not been operating, to make those specific types of announcement.

In terms of our other work, as I have said, the economic empowerment work has now become more urgent as a result of the need to make sure that we have the right sort of recovery in our economy, and that is a recovery that delivers equal opportunities for everybody. That has probably brought forward some of the Department's work on that front.

**Q69 Sara Britcliffe:** Just going on to the report, *The Good Parliament*, how far has the House of Commons progressed in introducing the recommendations in that report. Is there more that you would like to see done on this?

**Liz Truss:** I was one of the MPs who lobbied in 2010 for changes in the parliamentary hours because I thought they were ludicrous. We did succeed in some reform, bringing forward some of the evenings and making it more like a normal working day. There is further Parliament could go. It is still the case that we do not operate in a modern enough way. I am very pleased with what the Speaker has done in terms of the hybrid Parliament for operating now, but I would like to see us learn some of the lessons about how we can do things differently—how we can both support our constituents but also participate in Parliament in a more flexible way. We should not just go back to business as usual after we exit this crisis; we need to think about how we can do things differently. That is a key part of attracting a wider variety of people to serve in Parliament and serve as MPs. We are still not good enough at attracting a wide variety of people. We have got better, but we should use this opportunity to do things differently in Parliament. I hope that is



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

something that the Women and Equalities Select Committee can have a very important role in pushing forward.

Q70 **Sara Britcliffe:** Will you commence section 106 of the Equality Act, as recommended by the report?

**Liz Truss:** I would have to look into that in more detail.

Q71 **Kim Johnson:** Picking up on some of the BAME issues earlier, will the race disparity audit be updated, given that it was first published in 2017?

**Liz Truss:** That is really a matter for Theo Agnew at the Cabinet Office, but, of course, I am working with him on this overall Equalities Hub where everybody is going to be co-located. Broadly speaking, my view is that we should be making data available, and that should be the primary role of the Equalities Hub—making sure everybody has equal access to the facts.

Q72 **Kim Johnson:** In terms of timescales, when are you hoping this Equalities Hub will be up and running and in place?

**Liz Truss:** I pretty much press Helen every day on getting it to happen, so maybe I will just pass over to her to see where we are.

**Helen Cook:** That is certainly true. The units are already working much more closely together than they were, which is fantastic, and the Secretary of State outlined at the start her plans to bring us together even more to help us join up more with what we are doing and to share resources. Bringing us all together physically would certainly help with that, although, as we have all shown for the last four weeks, we can also work really well remotely, so we will probably have fewer excuses on that front when we get back.

Q73 **Kate Osborne:** Secretary of State, you have mentioned a couple of times that the under-18s need to be protected from irreversible decisions. Can you tell us more about this in terms of what you plan to put in place to achieve this and also who you will be working with, specifically in the trans community?

**Liz Truss:** In terms of the under-18s, my fundamental view is that grown adults should be able to make decisions to have agency, to live life as they see fit, but, before the age of 18, when people are still developing their decision-making capabilities, they should be protected from making decisions that are irreversible about their bodies that they could possibly regret in the future. This is work that we are currently carrying out. It is mainly led by the Department of Health, particularly in the area of transgender. What I was doing for the Committee was outlining the fundamental principle that is going to guide our work, both through the Department of Health and through the work we are doing on the Gender Recognition Act. The Gender Recognition Act is clearly about the over-18s, so it is not specifically relevant, but it is an important distinction that we make.



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

In terms of who we will talk to and consult with, we are of course happy to speak to everybody, and the Department of Health is as well. I would be happy to have follow-up conversations in advance of our announcements on the Gender Recognition Act.

**Kate Osborne:** I suppose a request, if you like, would be that you also bring on board specialists and people who can input into this on mental health.

**Liz Truss:** Yes, and this is precisely the work that the Department of Health is doing. Going back to the point I was making initially, the GEO clearly has a very important role at the centre here, but the Department of Health is the expert in terms of mental health and helping people manage these situations, so it is very much taking the lead on that part of the policy.

Q74 **Chair:** We have a bit of time, so I have some final questions, which might appear a little scattergun in nature. First, you have spoken a lot about the recovery and about the role of women in the economy as part of that recovery. Can I ask whether you have any concerns about the availability of good-quality childcare at the end of this crisis, and what representations you have made to the DfE about support for that sector?

**Liz Truss:** Yes, childcare is clearly an issue for people. It is incredibly tough at the moment for many families, through this crisis, getting on with work at home whilst supporting their children doing virtual learning. I have two of my children doing virtual learning as we are on this Committee call, probably using up all the broadband that they were meant to. It is tough for families; there is no doubt about that.

The work the Department of Education has done in keeping open schools for key workers and vulnerable children is very interesting. I have long been a proponent, since I had the role of Childcare Minister at the DfE, of schools offering more support for parents, and it would be useful, after the crisis, to look at how much more of that we can do. It is certainly a discussion I have had with the Education Secretary. He is an enthusiast for schools providing more of that sort of support, so I am very interested in that idea.

I am also interested how we can change the culture of offices to move away from presenteeism and towards more flexible working, and to integrate families more in the lives we all lead. It is noticeable now that I have conversations with chief executives and their children come into the room or whatever; people are more open about the role of family life in the workplace than they were before, and that is a positive change. Previously it was something that senior executives felt they had to hide away. As well as making sure that childcare is more flexible and supportive of parents, we also need to make sure the workplace is more flexible and supportive of parents. It cannot just be a one-way street.

Q75 **Chair:** Specifically about early years, you have mentioned schools and



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

the role that they have played, and they have done a brilliant job across the country in making sure that key workers' children are looked after. Have you made any representation to the DfE about the early-years sector and the current position that they are facing with funding, and are you concerned about the viability of that sector, which is so crucial to enabling particularly mothers to go back to work after maternity leave?

**Liz Truss:** Vicky Ford has done a lot of work as early-years Minister on supporting the nursery and childcare sector, and that is something that should be looked at by the DfE. I will certainly talk to them as we approach the economic recovery because, with more parents going back to work, we are going to need to make sure we have childcare provision in place, both for the early years and at school level.

Q76 **Chair:** On a completely different subject, at the beginning of this crisis the Department of Health seemed to go through a rotation of about 360 degrees on the issue of access to early medical abortions via either video consultation or telephone consultation. What representations did you make to the Secretary of State for Health during that process?

**Liz Truss:** I fully support the policy position we have now reached, which is making sure that women have access to those services.

Q77 **Chair:** That was not actually the question I asked. Did you make any representation to the Secretary of State during that process?

**Liz Truss:** I did discuss it and I am fully supportive of where we got to.

Q78 **Chair:** Did you make representations to him when he pulled back on that position at the very outset of the crisis?

**Liz Truss:** I am not going to reveal my internal discussions with other Government Ministers. I am fully supportive of the position and it is right that women have access to those services.

Q79 **Chair:** Is there yet a timetable in place for the national disability strategy?

**Liz Truss:** I would have to check on that. That is being led through the Disability Unit, but I will certainly check up on that.

Q80 **Chair:** It would be useful if you could let us know. Finally, throughout this Committee session you have made reference to the availability of data, the work that is ongoing in collating that and the fact that it may well take some time—months or possibly years—for us to fully understand the impact that Covid-19 has had on different communities and different sections of society. Our inquiry into coronavirus is very much a first step, and I have always been conscious that we may well wish to come back and review the decisions taken and the impacts, both short and long term. Given your enthusiasm for data collection and understanding that better, would you be happy to come back and talk to us about it when you have had a chance to both gather the data and analyse it?



## HOUSE OF COMMONS

**Liz Truss:** I certainly will be, and we will be making sure that you are updated as soon as we get the relevant data on the issues we have outlined. I can assure you that I am constantly banging the door for data for the rest of Government and, when I get hold of that data, I will make sure that we pass it on to the Committee.

**Chair:** Thank you very much, Secretary of State. Can I conclude by thanking everybody for their participation? This was our first attempt at an evidence session via Zoom. It has worked very well. The Secretary of State has made some very interesting points about how Parliament may function in the future; certainly as a first attempt, this has gone very well. This concludes the evidence session and I would like to thank all of you for taking part. I look forward to seeing you all virtually at the next meeting. Thank you.

**Liz Truss:** Thank you.