

Women and Equalities Committee

Oral evidence: [Work of the Government Equalities Office](#), HC 356

Wednesday 9 May 2018

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Members present: Mrs Maria Miller (Chair); Vicky Ford; Eddie Hughes; Jess Phillips; Mr Gavin Shuker; Tulip Siddiq.

Questions 91–127

Witnesses

I: Ali Harris, Chief Executive, Equality and Diversity Forum; Janet Veitch OBE, former Head of Gender Mainstreaming, Government Equalities Office; Gavin Freeguard, Associate Director, Institute for Government; Marcus Shephard, Researcher, Institute for Government.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Ali Harris, Janet Veitch OBE, Gavin Freeguard and Marcus Shephard.

Q91 Chair: Good morning. Can I welcome our witnesses and anybody who is watching in the gallery or online? A core part of the work that we do as a Committee is to look at the work of the Government Equalities Office. To do this, we take evidence from Ministers responsible for the GEO. Today, we are taking a slightly different approach. The latest changes to the Cabinet mean that the new Women and Equalities Minister, Penny Mordaunt, has not been able to be with us.

We have decided to look at the Department itself and the implications of this change in Minister, particularly given the fact that she is Secretary of State in the Department for International Development. We are taking the opportunity today to consider what the Government might be doing with GEO following this most recent appointment, as she is, of course, the fourth person to hold this title in the last two years. Before we start, can I first thank you all for coming in on relatively short notice, given the nature of the inquiry today? Could you perhaps say your name and the organisation you come from?

Ali Harris: I am Ali Harris from the Equality and Diversity Forum.

Janet Veitch: I am Janet Veitch. I am currently working as a freelancer on women's equality issues.

Gavin Freeguard: I am Gavin Freeguard from the Institute for Government. We are an independent think tank that works to make government more effective.

Marcus Shephard: I am Marcus Shephard. I am a researcher, also at the Institute for Government.

Chair: That is lovely. In the usual form, we all have different questions to ask. Jess is going to start.

Q92 Jess Phillips: As the Chair has said, we are now on our fourth Minister for Women and Equalities in two years. I suppose I would invite you all to answer. Is this just bad luck or does it indicate a lack of purpose?

Ali Harris: I am not entirely sure whether you could say it indicates a lack of purpose intentionally, but it certainly has resulted in a lack of purpose. That is the important thing, in terms of thinking about how we take forward gender and other equality issues. That is a short answer. I will move on for others to answer.

Janet Veitch: It has been like this, as you will remember, for some time. The reason I was invited is because I used to be head of gender mainstreaming at the Government Equalities Office, and then became director of the Women's National Commission. I worked in this scenario for 10 years and, in that time, we had six moves of Government



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Department. I think it has speeded up since then. For me, the most interesting question is why the equalities remit is seen as so much more portable than any other policy area. It has moved around. That means you get no real traction in any area. You do not have the machinery or the stability to support you in doing proper delivery work, I would argue.

Gavin Freeguard: I would agree with that. We are now on our seventh Cabinet-level Minister for Equalities since 2010, which is more than any other appointment. It seems to speak to the reasons for that moving around being quite high-level political. It seems to be something that is just given to a Minister, rather than there being a clear sense of what the Government wants to achieve with the Government Equalities Officer. As Janet suggested, it is not just about the disruption you get when a new Minister comes in; even if it is from the same party, people have very different styles and different priorities. It is also about the disruption we have seen in terms of moving the Civil Service around various Departments.

Marcus Shephard: I have nothing to add to that.

Q93 **Jess Phillips:** What, if anything, has been the impact of these changes on the specific effectiveness of the Government Equalities Office? We hear what you are saying. Although certainly not in my team, I would argue that there has been quite a big push recently by the Government Equalities Office around the equal pay stuff. It feels like some traction has occurred, but that does not necessarily marry up with the evidence just stated.

Ali Harris: There is an impact for us as EDF. We are the national network of equality and human rights organisations, and we take a pan-equality approach. There are two levels of impact. First, we do not currently have a Minister who has had long enough to get to grips with the pan-equality brief. The second level is looking at the individual members we have working on gender, race and disability. We currently do not have a Minister who is able to address those issues sufficiently or to look at it from a pan-equality perspective, so to look, for example, at intersectionality, the impact on disabled women, the changes in the labour market or the impact on BAME women. There is the intersectionality piece, but there is also the pan-equality piece.

As you have mentioned, quite rightly, a lot of progress has been made in terms of the gender pay gap. That is something we very much welcome. If you had a Minister who had been in post longer and perhaps had a different role, they would be able to look much more strategically at the disability pay gap or the disability employment gap, as well as race, and at what we can learn across the piece. When you have an understanding across the piece, you understand what is happening underneath. That helps you to understand what the solutions might be, rather than developing more ad hoc or specific solutions and not getting the learning. There has been an impact there with the changes.



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Another thing that members have told us about, and we as EDF have experienced, is the lack of time to establish relationships and build an understanding of the agenda at those two levels. Lack of time to really go into depth and to engage with the more difficult issues has been a concern. That has impacted on progress. We have seen progress in some areas, but overall it is quite hard to see what the plan is. There are areas where we have had some very good progress. That is welcome, but what are we trying to achieve overall, and how are we best going to get there? It is very difficult to have that conversation in the current environment.

Q94 **Jess Phillips:** Janet, from your time there and after, do you feel there have been policies that were not implemented to their fruition or fell off the radar because of changes?

Janet Veitch: Yes. There were a number of things. Things fall off the radar every time there is a move, because you shift priorities immediately. As you know, the Civil Service is there to support the Minister who is in place and works in pretty siloed ways. Working across Departments is the most difficult, tricky thing to do.

I really wanted to support what Ali said about taking a more strategic approach. If we had a proper equalities strategy, with what you might call proper targets, you would be able to take a long-term view, and arguably you would be more robust to resist the problems and dislocations that come when you make shifts of the machinery.

With some of the quick wins you talked about, I think GEO is trying, quite reasonably, to take a project-based approach. The Minister for Women at the moment knows that she has GEO as her small machine, so she can do things like, for example, the work on women returners and the pay gap work. That is relatively simple to do within those resources. What is much more difficult is, as Ali said, the cross-Government work and the long-term stuff to make a culture shift, which is what you actually want to do. If we could have a proper equalities strategy, that would really help.

Marcus Shepherd: At the institute, we have a series of interviews with former Ministers called Ministers Reflect. One thing that has come through from this is a reflection on the advantage of joint Ministers for cross-departmental working. One of the things that were spoken of by some former junior Ministers in women and equalities was the ability to cut across the siloes. There is some debate about how effective this is. As a counterpoint to that, Nicky Morgan in her interview talked about how, when you are something like a Secretary of State for Education, it is such a big brief that it can squash out everything else. You have to manage that relationship quite carefully.

The women and equalities brief is an important one, but in the battle between that and a line Department, the line Department is almost always going to win. In terms of building that long-term agenda, even



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leaving aside the churn stuff, our Ministers Reflect work has very strongly made the case that the longer you can keep a Minister in office, the more effective they can be. Managing that tension between big brief and little brief is a real challenge, even within the wider context of the cross-department work.

Q95 Jess Phillips: I would invite you all to answer this. Do you think it being in the international development brief would make a difference? It is a massive thing; it is not necessarily a government priority in the same way that education might be.

Marcus Shephard: One of the things I found interesting, looking at the evidence you took back in October from the junior Ministers there, is that they were very effusive about how they thought the Department for Education was absolutely the right home.

Jess Phillips: They all say that at the time.

Marcus Shephard: This is one of the things we thought. You can define a synergy between the women and equalities brief and a whole host of Departments, such as DFID.

Jess Phillips: We are everywhere.

Vicky Ford: It is at least 50%.

Marcus Shephard: It would be hard to say, outside of perhaps the Cabinet Office, whether there is a definitive Department that should be the home for this. Any Minister can say, "We are educating the future female leaders of tomorrow; it should totally be here" or "At DWP, we are creating opportunities for women in the workplace; it should be here". These are not bad arguments, but I do not think any of them are definitively saying, "This is the right home for women and equalities". The movement reflects a degree of uncertainty around that.

Gavin Freeguard: It is striking that, if you look at the "about" page on the Government Equalities Office website, there are 10 different Departments that it says it works with quite closely. Each one of those makes a really clear case for why the brief might work quite well in any of them. Fundamentally, although there might be synergies in individual Departments, and there are clearly crossovers in areas of work wherever you look, it all comes back to what you want the Government Equalities Office to do across Government. What is the strategy? What are you trying to achieve?

Janet Veitch: Thinking about DFID in particular, whenever we made a move, we always had to rewrite the Minister's brief and make a virtue of whatever Department we ended up in. I remember, when we moved to the Cabinet Office many years ago, we were able to say "at the heart of Government" and that was the selling point. When we moved away, it was quite difficult. We moved to the Department of Trade and Industry



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at that point. It was quite difficult to claim our relationship, although obviously there was one.

In terms of DFID, the thing that would bother me about going to a Department like that, on the face of it, is that there are two things we have all said we need. We need co-ordination of authority and some ability to bring Departments together, which might suggest the Cabinet Office, and/or we need a budget, and most of the budgets are in delivery Departments. It seems to me that DFID does not have a co-ordinating role domestically. It does not have any domestic locus. All its work, authority, attention and expertise are international. It is quite difficult for me to imagine how it would co-ordinate work domestically when it has never done that before.

Q96 Jess Phillips: In previous moves—if memory serves me correctly, there have been a lot—has it been more important to go with a Minister who really cares about the subject, or to go to a Department that is congruous?

Janet Veitch: In practice, the thing that has made a difference, in my personal experience, is the commitment of the Minister. As an ex-civil servant, I would always prioritise how to set up machinery that will work and be effective regardless. I am really reluctant to give that answer but, in practice, it was the commitment of the Minister, especially as they are sharing, as has already been said. They are doing this alongside a very big portfolio. It is that commitment that gets things done.

Ali Harris: If I could come in on a few of those points, I certainly agree with what has been said so far, in terms of needing to know what you want to achieve to decide where best to place things. In talking to some of our members very quickly before today's session, the commitment of the Minister came through as a major priority, in that it helps to drive results. I am sure we have all seen that. It does not have to be "either/or"; it should not be "either/or". We should be looking for Ministers who have the commitment and the structures to support them. I do not see why we have to put it into a binary situation.

Jess Phillips: It is a triumph of hope over experience.

Ali Harris: Yes, but you have to stay hopeful. That is what we should be looking for. We should not let it rely on the commitment of Ministers. We should put in place the structures to support them, because commitment alone is not enough.

In terms of the placing and where it sits, some of the feedback that we have had on the recent placing in the Department for Education was that it did not seem to have generated much of a shift in the policy focus, which is interesting.

Q97 Chair: Sorry, do you mean GEO's policy focus or the Education Department's?



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Ali Harris: There has not been that—what do you call it?—mutual synergy.

Mr Shuker: Reciprocity.

Ali Harris: Yes, reciprocity. One of the arguments is that it can be very helpful, because it can help drive change within a specific Government Department. That has not necessarily always been seen, from the feedback we have had.

Q98 **Chair:** The decision by the Government to implement sex and relationship education for all children in the UK as mandatory is quite a big change, is it not?

Ali Harris: It is a big change, yes. I am reporting back what our members have said. No one is denying there has been progress in some areas, but they have not seen an overall shift in approach; that is what they are trying to say. That particular change was very welcome across the sector.

In terms of the move to DFID, there is a concern, as Janet has said, about it not being placed in a domestically-focused Department, and that it should be placed in a domestically-focused Department. There is an additional issue, which is that there could be drift, in terms of the GEO's focus starting to move to how it can support change on the international level. Its role needs to be focused on the domestic level. That is something I would not want to see happen. It may not happen, but we have to make sure it does not happen.

Having said that, there is also a risk that we, as the GEO supporting DFID, would see our role as spreading gender equality around the world. In actual fact, a lot of good practice has happened within the development sector on gender equality, and domestically we have a lot to learn that way round. Those are the sorts of things we would need to guard against happening.

Q99 **Jess Phillips:** Finally, what do the changes do to the perception of the role of Minister for Women, both within and without Government?

Ali Harris: Within the sector, it is hard to know where you and your issues stand.

Q100 **Jess Phillips:** What do you feel about the position? In the sector, what is the perception of the role? You can be honest; it is okay.

Ali Harris: It is good that there is a role. We do not need to beat ourselves up more than we should do. It is fantastic that there is a role. It is fantastic that there are roles, not just one role; there are roles. It is about how we build and improve on that. There has always been some level of churn. That has speeded up, and the question is how we can guard against that, because the perception begins to be that this is going down the agenda. Equality enjoys—and I use that word having thought about it—such a level of cross-party support now. We are in a different



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place that we were a number of years ago. That is not reflected at the moment in what is happening with the ministerial appointments. It could be.

Janet Veitch: Can I say a couple of things on that? First, I want to come back to your question about moving and how that pans out. When we were moving around while I was there, in that 10-year period, I thought that this could have advantages, because you go to a Department, embed good practice and then move on to another, as a bit of a caravan. That could work really effectively, but in practice what tended to happen was that the priority was dropped as soon as the ministerial brief was lost from the Department.

If I think back to all the Departments we have been to, I do not see much sign, for example, in the Department for Work and Pensions that all the work that Harriet Harman did to try to embed women's equality in its thinking bore fruit. The problems with universal credit and split payments would have been considered in advance if proper mainstreaming had been in place, you might argue. I just wanted to add that.

In terms of perception, people wonder whether this is a priority or not, because you cannot think of anything that is really important that would be moved around in this somewhat cavalier way. Think about something like civil contingencies, for example. It does not move because you really want it to work. You have a proper strategy. You have co-ordinating mechanisms around Government to make sure that all the work is brought together. That does not happen at the moment.

Chair: Could we move on to the effects of these machinery of government changes, which are huge? That will probably be a really important part of this discussion.

Q101 **Vicky Ford:** My question is about the practicalities of what it means, to really understand that. In general, what effect does the rapid turnover have on Civil Service effectiveness and how long does it take departmental plans, budgets or accommodation to catch up? What are the practical impacts?

Gavin Freeguard: There are two ways of looking at that. One is the effect of changing the Minister so frequently, and one is moving the civil servants around and the machinery changing. On the ministerial reshuffle side, a lot of Ministers would say that it takes them about two years to get into their role properly and understand exactly what is going on. Of course, the civil servants have to deal with a new face coming in, with different priorities, and have to adjust to different styles and work to them in a different way.

When it comes to the civil servants moving around, there is a great quote from our Ministers Reflect interview with Nicky Morgan about the GEO moving from DCMS to DfE. She says it was "quite tricky and quite



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traumatic". You have to think about all the practicalities, the mundane things like computer systems not talking to one another and security passes not working. In a practical day-to-day sense, there is quite a lot that one has to think about when making those moves.

Q102 Vicky Ford: Is that what would be happening in this case? The office needs to physically move desks, computers and security passes.

Gavin Freeguard: It certainly has a number of times over the last few years. I am not sure if DFID is planning to do that this time round.

Chair: The idea behind today's evidence session is to give our views to the Department on what might be best, rather than just assume that that might happen.

Janet Veitch: On the logistics side, it is enormously disruptive. I would have a person working more or less full time, just on the stuff you are talking about. I am sorry if this gets a bit boring and tedious, but you are migrating all your online information into a completely different IT system, because of all the data rules that you have to abide by now. That takes an enormous amount of time in itself: how are you going to do it? Pay and grading systems are completely different, so you have to migrate all your staff on to new contracts and agree whether their jobs are at a certain level, higher or lower. That all takes an enormous amount of time.

Inevitably, if people see their future in the Cabinet Office and they find they are moving over to DCMS or DFID, they may not think that their skills will be usable there. As you know, civil servants would expect to move on every three years or so. It is extremely important. You get a bit of a migration of people saying, "Okay, I do not want to come". Then you lose expertise on the ground, but you could also lose your senior management team. You lose leadership capacity as well.

Q103 Vicky Ford: From your answer to the previous question, on the one hand it sounds as if passing the baton between different ministerial responsibilities might be quite good, because everybody then has responsibility, but the practicalities of doing it are administratively impracticable.

Janet Veitch: They are hugely difficult. A reshuffle, as has been said, is a relatively normal occurrence, and people get used to that, but one of the things people often say about the UK Executive is that it is a stable entity and we do not replace our Civil Service when we have a change of Administration, unlike the US, which might be an example of that. We lose that stability the moment you start having regular machinery of government moves. That means that the work stops or at least comes to a juddering halt for a time, while you start to think about what you might do instead.

The most important point that I really want to make is that the people to whom you are going might well be able to manage that and absorb you.



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That is just a temporary dislocation. It is the fact that they know you are not going to stick around that means it is not worth their while investing in you, so you will not necessarily get the best office space. It might not seem that important, but if you want everybody to be working together in the same area that is quite important. The fact that they know you are going to go means that you will not get priority in terms of budgets, seeing Ministers and good staff coming in from the receiving Department.

The fights over money are also quite tricky. You will have a certain budget. I am not quite sure how separate the budget stream for GEO now is but, even when it was completely separate, Departments would argue that certain amounts of money should be retained by them. You tend to go with less money than you arrived with.

- Q104 **Chair:** Marcus and Gavin, there have been other recent examples of new Departments formed and Departments merging. I noticed in a briefing note the Cabinet Office guidance on the 100-day rule in terms of transfer of functions. Ironically, it has meant that the Home Office has never had the GEO in it because the tenure was only 110 days. Drawing more widely on those machinery of government changes, the creation of something new or the merging of Departments, can you draw any other conclusions? Not just focusing on the history of the GEO, are there any other pearls of wisdom you would want to impart to us?

Gavin Freeguard: The first thing to say, given everything else I am about to say, is that they are not always a bad idea. If you want to raise a particular item up the agenda or it makes operational sense, machinery of government changes can be a good thing. That said, they can also be incredibly disruptive. They can be expensive. We did some research back in 2010 looking at the creation of DECC, for instance, which cost about £16 million just in start-up costs.

When you are merging Departments, you are back to those issues about computer systems, data protection and the physical move of having to put people in new buildings. If you are merging Departments, you also have issues around different pay grades. That has been quite an interesting one for BEIS more recently, with DECC and BIS having quite different pay scales. That is a very, very long way of saying they come with quite a lot of disruption, even if they can sometimes be positive.

- Q105 **Vicky Ford:** At the moment, as I understand it, the civil servants in the GEO are still physically located in the Department for Education, even though their Ministers are in the Home Office and DFID. What challenge does that bring? Given what you have said about the physical, practical problems of moving the machinery of government, should we recommend leaving it physically within the Department for Education? What would your recommendation be?

Marcus Shephard: On a slightly prosaic note, physical proximity to the person you are working with is always advantageous. If you are the civil servant supporting Ministers who are in two different buildings some way



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away from you, that is fundamentally going to make your job harder. As a recommendation, it would be good for the GEO to have a permanent home, but until there is a clearer sense of its purpose and where it sits within Government, and some thinking about what political heft and support it needs in the structures around it, making that determination will be quite hard.

It continues to bounce around all over the place. It seems to be like the dog that is chasing the bus. It is always two steps behind where the Ministers are. I am sure it will move to DFID in nine months' time and, by that point, the Minister for Women and Equalities will probably be—

Vicky Ford: I am not sure I like that analogy.

Marcus Shephard: Apologies.

Vicky Ford: Let us move on to the next set of questions.

Q106 **Mr Shuker:** Do you think a Prime Minister will ever appoint a man as the Minister for Women, and why?

Janet Veitch: I would start from the position that more than half of the population, 51%, are female. While we are so underrepresented in politics and other decision-making, it would seem odd if we had to put another male Minister in charge of it, since there are so many male Ministers already. That would be my starting point.

Ali Harris: Your question was “ever”, as opposed to “now”. You would hope we would get past that point. At the moment, a third of Cabinet Ministers are women. It makes absolute sense that it should continue to be a woman. You would hope we would get to a point, although I do not see it happening right now, where it could be a man. If you think about the role that men can play as allies on gender equality, it would make sense, but we are not there. We are not there yet and there is a long way to go. Hopefully we will get there.

Q107 **Mr Shuker:** Chair, the reason why I ask, and I think you hinted towards it, is that there is a symbolic power and responsibility in appointing a woman prominently to have that brief. Is the flipside that it can too easily become an afterthought or a bit of political dressing, rather than a machinery of government decision?

Janet Veitch: If you can read anything into the timing of these announcements, you might say that it has often been an afterthought. They have got better at doing that recently, so it tends not to be. Yes, I probably would, if I were in this happy position, do a swap. If we had women in all the three great offices of state, I would be happier to accept a man as Minister for Women and Equalities.

Q108 **Mr Shuker:** What do you think about the suggestion that has been made by some that there should just be a Minister for Equalities? What would be the pros and cons of doing that? Do you think it might add more



stability to the role?

Janet Veitch: Should I start that one off? I am sure Ali has views, in particular. Again, it is the fact that women are half of the population. That is a key issue. Secondly, there is a qualitative difference between what we are trying to do in women's equality and what we are trying to do in most of the other areas. This is not a completely true argument but, in the main, for the other minority groups, we are talking about trying to bring them up to the same level as everybody else. With women, their reproductive roles and the unpaid caring work drive a lot of women's inequality. You are talking about making a cultural shift, which is not just about ending discrimination per se.

Q109 **Mr Shuker:** In that context, does it make sense to do what the current Administration have done, which is to have a Minister for Women and a Minister for Equalities additionally? Does that make a practical difference?

Janet Veitch: You can do that, but there is a lot of synergy, despite what I have just said about the two things having different priorities, in keeping those roles together, so somebody is able to take a holistic view right across the equalities brief. I do not know whether you feel that, Ali.

Ali Harris: Women are over half the population. There are some additional issues. It makes sense to have a women and equalities or women and equality role. It would work better if we had an overall Minister who had the time and the support to look at the whole piece, to have a thorough understanding also around disability and race et cetera. At the moment, in the way it is split, it is really a focus on women and LGBT issues. We certainly welcome that there is that focus, but so much gets lost and there are so many lost opportunities in that. If you had a Minister for Women and Equality who was full time, had the capacity to focus and was in a more stable situation, that would change more and drive better change than thinking about changing the title of the role or changing the focus in that way.

Sitting under that, at the moment, we have ministerial roles around women and equalities; then you have other Ministers in other Departments. If you had the overall Minister, who had the time, who could bring all those together more effectively and work more effectively across the whole piece, that would drive change much more effectively than what we have now.

Q110 **Mr Shuker:** I do not want to put words into your mouth, but what I take from what you said there is about the lack of resource and the possibility of having it as a Minister who attends Cabinet or as a Cabinet role. The protected characteristics of gender and orientation often win out over other protected characteristics, just because there is a lack of resource. Would that be a fair characterisation of how you feel about it?

Ali Harris: The other characteristics sit in other Departments, and you do not get the synergy. If you had an overall Minister at Cabinet level—I



do not know if we are going to discuss that—that would probably be a good place for it to sit. It is about understanding exactly what we are trying to achieve and what is happening across Government, in order to progress that. As Janet mentioned earlier, at the moment, partly through necessity of the way things are set up, we have a sort of project focus around women and equalities. You are always going to need an element of that to move forward specific pieces of work and specific agendas.

What is missing is effective mainstreaming. If you had the type of Minister that we were talking about, they could be working at a high enough level to look at things like this, so we have our purpose, we know what our strategic objectives are, but how we drive them through the rest of what is happening in Government. How do we drive it through the industrial strategy, the social inclusion strategy? How does it play across all those, and what are the opportunities in those to lever additional progress to what you would get if you just had a project about women returners, for example?

Q111 Mr Shuker: Gavin and Marcus, you have experience of the wide gamut. To what extent are we making this a particularly unique argument or case? I am aware that other Departments or Ministers would perhaps move around more often. Is there anything that is analogous to the women and equalities role in the current Government?

Gavin Freeguard: It is a question we have been asking ourselves this week. The GEO is quite an unusual construct. Therefore, the ministerial situation around it is also quite unusual. Thinking about what Janet and Ali have just said, you could imagine a scenario where you use junior Ministers quite effectively to do some of that day-to-day project work. Junior Ministers are often forgotten about by the public at large, but they do a lot of the heavy lifting in Parliament and Departments. Perhaps you could use a Cabinet-level Minister who is able to do more of the cross-Government work.

It is also worth saying, and we have touched on this already, that Ministers and joint-Ministers are not the only way to get things done across Government. There are other options, such as being able to use co-ordinating machinery in the Cabinet Office. That would be one option, especially if you can get into the secretariats that help run Cabinet meetings and Cabinet Committees. You could look at things like pooled budgets. There are a few other routes available, as well as looking at the ministerial set up.

Mr Shuker: I have two other questions. The first is quite niche. With the implementation of SDG 5, the Government have made a decision to do that departmentally, rather than in a cross-cutting role. Is now a good time to go into DFID, or do the restrictions that you have outlined still make it more difficult?

Janet Veitch: I would make the same argument about DFID having the domestic lead over implementation of SDG 5, and indeed all the SDGs, as



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I do about it having this brief. If you are internationally-focused, it is very difficult to turn around and start doing things domestically. It is difficult to see why your Cabinet colleagues would engage with you, knowing you are not going to have the brief for very long anyway.

Could I really quickly address the question of Cabinet Sub-Committees, which you have just mentioned? There used to be a Cabinet Sub-Committee for women—you might be aware of that—and gradually it was diluted down. As far as I can tell, having quickly looked at the website last night, there does not seem to be a Cabinet Sub-Committee that deals with this issue at the moment. It would be an obvious thing to recommend, because then you would have that co-ordinating machinery, which a dedicated Minister would be able to use to bring together Cabinet colleagues.

Q112 Mr Shuker: Sajid Javid was the Minister for Equalities at one point in the past. Why do you think he was not appointed as the Minister for Women and Equalities, given that it would not have required a change in the infrastructure?

Janet Veitch: It is hard to look into Theresa May's mind, is it not? I am not sure we can answer that.

Q113 Mr Shuker: Do you think that, when Prime Ministers make these decisions, they think about the practical implications that you have outlined? Do you think they are aware of them and therefore make a judgment that there is a better option?

Gavin Freeguard: A lot of our work would suggest that the primary driver tends to be political when it comes to reshuffles. Thinking about which potential Minister might be best suited to which position is not something that tends to be at the forefront of their minds, to put it mildly.

Mr Shuker: That is very diplomatic.

Q114 Tulip Siddiq: Some of this has already been asked, and this is a problem with coming in a bit late, but I will just ask again. The Committee has repeatedly asked GEO Ministers why the cross-Government equality strategy element of their role does not appear to be reflected in GEO work or performance indicators. Do you think this part of the remit is cosmetic or just less tangible?

Gavin Freeguard: When you say "cosmetic", do you have anything particular in mind?

Q115 Tulip Siddiq: Is it just there without any real purpose, I suppose?

Gavin Freeguard: There is a very wide question there about government performance measures generally. More recently, we have seen the single departmental plans that have been introduced. Having had a look at the DfE one, which is the one that includes the GEO indicators, it is not always clear what the connection is between the work



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of the GEO and those indicators. What have they been given the authority to do that would actually move some of those things? There is a broader question there about measuring government performance, which we will be thinking about quite a lot in the next few months. That is not much help right now.

Again, to be boring and come back to a point we have made before, setting out exactly what you want the GEO to do, having that written strategy and understanding how you would measure success against those different measures is key and fundamental to all that.

Q116 Tulip Siddiq: Do you think it is different from other Departments?

Gavin Freeguard: In the way that it is cross-Government, up to a point, yes. Departments within their own plans should be working with others to make certain things happen. We have seen joint Ministers, joint budgets and joint performance indicators over the last couple of decades across various areas. It then comes to the question: what is it that you can do? What levers do you have to make those things happen across Government, and how do you reflect those in things like single departmental plans? There is a big general question about how you reflect joint working in those sorts of performance measures.

Marcus Shephard: Section 4.2 of the DfE's single departmental plan covers working towards an inclusive society and ending discrimination. That sets the priorities. Women in the workforce, women on FTSE 350 boards and stuff like this is measurable, but beyond that it is very hard to assess the success or failure of the GEO. As we said earlier, this is subsumed into the objectives of another Department, so it is hard to disentangle what specifically the GEO is trying to do in itself as a Department from the wider work of whichever Department is hosting it.

There is a broader question here. It is clear to an extent whom the GEO is accountable to, but it is not entirely clear on the face of it what it is accountable for. There is a general sense of what it is trying to do, but it is very hard to find specifics on that. That could be developed, to help it be more effective.

Q117 Chair: Marcus, can I intervene there? I struggle with the idea that people do not know what the purpose of GEO is: it is to reduce inequality. It is a very high-level objective. The point you have just made is about what it is accountable for within delivering that. Surely that is the issue, not what its purpose is, because its purpose is very clear: it is to reduce inequality in the broadest of senses. A Government cannot have its Government Equality Office with anything less than a very high-level objective in that way, surely.

Marcus Shephard: I would not disagree with that. I was perhaps coming down to the slightly lower level of what its responsibilities are, day to day, beyond the broader goal of reducing inequality, which is absolutely appropriate, but you need to have something more specific



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that it can be measured against and identify responsibilities that are solely within the bailiwick of the GEO.

Gavin Freeguard: There is a question that one could ask about what those steps to that wider goal are: could you tell whether they have been achieved or not? That has not always clear from the single departmental plans. In general, they have got a bit better, certainly when it comes to GEO.

Janet Veitch: You could take the example of the cross-Government violence against women and girls strategy that the Home Office owns. Although you might argue there are things that have not worked particularly effectively, they bring the different Departments together. They have an action plan that underlines the overall strategy, so there are specific performance indicators that they are monitoring. They meet regularly and they look at progress. There are certainly things you might do better, but that is the kind of thing you would hope the GEO would be effectively co-ordinating.

Ali Harris: One area we have not really touched on that is relevant here is around engagement with stakeholders. As the GEO's focus has become more project-based in a limited number of areas, we have seen a reduction in both the cross-governmental mechanisms and the engagement with stakeholders around that. There is room for improving that situation. One of the structures that used to exist was the Women's National Commission, for example, where the GEO had a senior stakeholder group. None of them are perfect answers to situations, but they enable regular contact, and they enable us to play a part in setting what the priorities are, have conversations about those priorities and look at not just one single issue but across the piece.

That would help to shape departmental plans. It would help in looking at what reasonable measures would be, and it would potentially help to create a sense of understanding of the priorities, why they are currently the priorities, why those specific priorities have been chosen, and help to achieve those priorities. Recently, it has felt a bit random in terms of what has been chosen as the focus for the work of the GEO.

Q118 **Tulip Siddiq:** I am going to go back to this question of ministerial accountability and the changes, which you have all touched on briefly. Do you think the changes of ministerial accountability have affected the UK's response to its international commitments on equality? The sustainable development goals are one example. Do you think that has made a difference?

Ali Harris: Let me have a think. There are clear ways in which sustainable development goal 5 is being progressed. Are you talking about domestically or internationally?

Tulip Siddiq: Internationally.



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Ali Harris: We do not work on an international level, so I do not want to comment on that.

Gavin Freeguard: Nor do we.

Janet Veitch: I could say a little bit. The GEO has always had the co-ordinating responsibility for this work. If I take the example of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which we are currently preparing for, its role is a co-ordinating role and it simply writes out to Government Departments asking them to submit evidence, which is then collated. I would argue that, if there was more stability and it was able to give more time to that, it might think more clearly about whether it can start preparing earlier, bring people together and really make a proper narrative of this report.

If you read the state report, and I am sure that you have, you will see that there are gaps in it that you would not expect. It does not have things like statistics showing trends over time. In fact, there is a paucity of statistics generally in the report. If there was more stability, it would be able to input more to things like the universal periodic review, CERD and disabilities conventions, and make sure there is a proper equalities angle to them.

Q119 **Tulip Siddiq:** Does anyone want to comment on that, even if it is domestic? It does not have to be international.

Marcus Shephard: I would add one thing on the accountability point. One advantage of having a strong ministerial focus is that it creates accountability and can give a body more political clout, because you have that feedback loop. I am not saying that is absent. The GEO is accountable to the Women and Equalities Minister, but it is that idea of having a champion for it. If this is an issue you want to give political salience to, you need to give it a bit more clout and have that champion.

Q120 **Chair:** We have talked quite a lot this morning about the home of GEO and where it might sit in the future. Can I move your attention directly to that? Are there some Departments that would never be the right place to put GEO? Specifically, what would be the pros and cons of locating it in the Cabinet Office, particularly given we now have things like the race disparity audit located in the Cabinet Office already? Do you want to give us your thoughts on that?

Marcus Shephard: We had a discussion about this. There are some Departments that you can make a case for being strange locations in which to put the GEO relative to other Departments, for example the Northern Ireland Office or the Ministry of Defence. Broadly speaking, we are looking at the Cabinet Office, given its proximity to the centre of Government. If you want to build that political salience around the issue of equalities, if you want to emphasise it, placing it as close to the centre of Government as possible is good. It has this cross-governmental liaison role, which mirrors a lot of the work the Cabinet Office does. There are



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advantages to it being in an environment where that sort of thinking and those sorts of resources are already available, which it can perhaps share and build on.

Gavin Freeguard: Broadly, there are a lot of good reasons for putting it in the Cabinet Office. Marcus and the entire panel have touched on those. Getting into Cabinet machinery, it is more traditionally a co-ordinating Department. It could provide a more permanent home than we have seen in recent years, but it would not be a panacea. One of the key points we have touched on quite a lot is about political drive. If you are moving it to the Cabinet Office, it would make an awful lot of sense if the Prime Minister in particular was driving that agenda. We have seen a lot of successful units set up in the Cabinet Office that tried to change the way Government worked or focused on particular topics over recent years. That political will is the key point.

To take one example, we were more positive about the move of data from the Cabinet Office to DCMS recently, which seemed to go against what we would normally say about co-ordinating machinery being based in the Cabinet Office. We thought it was not a terrible move because of the political will and political interest of the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Broadly, there are good reasons for the Cabinet Office, but there are other things that need to be considered, not least the politics driving it.

Q121 **Chair:** Should we not design Government for situations other than the enthusiasm of an individual?

Gavin Freeguard: Yes, absolutely, and try to embed, even if you have an enthusiastic Minister at the start, that enthusiasm through structures. If you look at the most successful units at the centre, especially Cabinet Office ones, some have had quite short lifespans or have changed quite quickly into mainstreaming things across Departments.

Q122 **Chair:** Give us an example.

Gavin Freeguard: The Behavioural Insights Team might be one example. That tried to change the way the Government worked. In a sense, it deliberately challenged existing ways of working. An important component of all this is what problem you think you are trying to solve with a particular unit in the Cabinet Office, and what particular way of working you therefore want that unit to get involved in.

Q123 **Eddie Hughes:** The Behavioural Insights Team was sold off, was it not?

Gavin Freeguard: It was.

Q124 **Eddie Hughes:** Is that your idea of how it would ultimately look?

Gavin Freeguard: No, not necessarily. That is just one example of a unit that has been able to have quite a short-term impact. It did then, as you say, get sold off, but it is still working quite a lot with Government. There are different models in there. That is just one.



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Q125 **Chair:** I find it interesting that neither of you have advocated a standalone Department, as it was in 2011. That was not an instinctive reaction from you.

Marcus Shephard: Our general feeling is that setting up new Departments is costly, complicated and comes with a lot of challenges. It is not something that cannot be done, as Gavin said. DECC was a good example of this, but it is not a position that we would rush to advocate.

Gavin Freeguard: As Marcus said, it is certainly a position. We may have inadvertently dismissed that without intending to, and there might be good reasons for it. It is worth saying that it would be quite a small Department. If you look at the staff numbers, there are about 75 at the moment in the Government Equalities office. That would make it bigger than the Attorney-General's office or the Wales Office, but it would be small than the Scotland Office, the Northern Ireland Office and quite a few hundred smaller than DExEU or DCMS. It would be a small standalone Department. That is not to say it should not be explored.

Q126 **Chair:** We also have the Office for Disability Issues, which is located within the Department for Work and Pensions, which is a curious thing, if you think that it is separate from the Government Equalities Office. Have you ever considered why that is a status quo that we should support, and why the two things are not merged into one?

Gavin Freeguard: It is not something that we have looked at, so I would not be able to give a definitive answer on it, but it also comes back to the wider point about whether you want to bring all the equalities machinery together. We have mentioned the race disparity audit. It is interesting that that was a Cabinet Office initiative rather than a GEO one.

Q127 **Chair:** On a strategic level, as an organisation, do you see that it is stronger for Government to have particular units like the race disparity audit, the Office for Disability Issues and the Government Equality Office separated, or would it strategically be stronger that they are located together? I am not sure I have a firm understanding of your particular stance on that. We also have a strategy for race issues in the Communities Department, and various other Departments with fingers in the pie. Is it stronger or weaker to have it dissipated in that way?

Marcus Shephard: Embedding expertise within Departments has a lot of value. It is one of those things that, until you see how it is done and how it is implemented, you cannot assess how effective it would be. Potentially, yes, bringing everything into one stronger co-ordinating body with a bigger brief and more political heft could definitely drive an agenda forward more strongly. Given that the GEO has this special, very, very broad remit across Departments, perhaps there is a balance to be found through providing that expertise in more specialised and directly delivered ways to individual Departments. Beyond that, it would be pure speculation on my part.



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Ali Harris: It is worth looking at. We can go back through our research network and investigate whether anyone has done any thinking on this at an academic level. It is not something that we have looked at ourselves directly, but we can go back and look at that. In the shorter term, though, the race disparity audit is a really good example of how, if you do locate something in the heart of Government, you have a potential for impact and you can work across Government effectively. I am going to come back to the point that, if you had a full-time Minister for whom this was their full responsibility, probably placed in the Cabinet Office, which we have never tried before, it could generate a real difference. It may matter less, or it could work very well, that you have different Ministers and different responsibilities across other Departments, because you have a clear place for them to come together and someone with clear responsibility for co-ordinating and understanding how that all works.

For me, instinctively, that would be the first step. It would take some additional work to look at whether it would be better to bring it all together. I certainly agree that the ODI feels like it is less connected to the broader equality debate and discussion than you would want it to be. One way or another, you would want to look at how you brought that in more effectively. It feels more distant from our stakeholders' perspective than, say, the work that happens in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government around race, where there is more synergy. Because there is not anyone who has the responsibility and the time to make that happen, it is not going to happen in the interim.

Janet Veitch: You have reminded me, Ali, that Professor Teresa Rees at Cardiff University has done quite a lot of work on this from an academic perspective, talking about tinkering, tailoring and transforming, the three different stages of mainstreaming something. The essential point is that it is a two-pronged approach. You need the co-ordination and the focal point centrally, but you also need capacity in each Department. Taking the ODI as an example, the answer is possibly a compromise between the two positions that you put, where some of it, the co-ordinating role, needs to be more strongly at the centre, but you need capacity in places like DWP and the other Departments, where the work needs to be done on the ground, so the policy issues are owned by a particular delivery Department. That capacity needs to exist, and you need people at the centre who can hold them to account, to make sure the resources are there, the budget is there, the staff are there and they are delivering on what they said they would deliver on.

Chair: Wonderful. Thank you so much for your time. We really appreciate it. It is going to be a hot topic for us for the next few weeks, as we would like to be able to write to the Secretary of State with our views and thoughts in advance of any final decisions being made. Your thoughts today, I am sure, will help us with that process.