



**Joint Committee
on Human Rights**



**Women and Equalities
Committee**

On Tuesday 1 July the Joint Committee on Human Rights and the Women and Equalities Committee took evidence from the Government's preferred candidate for the role of Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission.

On Wednesday 2 July the Committees wrote to the Minister for Women and Equalities and Secretary of State for Education.

Following meetings between the Chairs of the Committees and Baroness Smith, Minister for Women and Equalities, the Committees agreed to place that correspondence in the public domain.



**Joint Committee
on Human Rights**



**Women and Equalities
Committee**

2 July 2025

Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson
Secretary of State for Education and
Minister for Women and Equalities

Appointment of the Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission

Dear Secretary of State,

Our two Committees met yesterday, 1 July, to hold a pre-appointment hearing with the Government's preferred candidate for the post of Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, Dr Mary-Ann Stephenson.

We held a wide-ranging discussion with the candidate, covering topics including:

- Suitability of the candidate's knowledge and experience
- The equalities and human rights remits of the EHRC, including regarding race, disability and Islamophobia
- The role of the EHRC as equality law regulator and enforcer
- Future relationships with the Government and Parliament
- Board level vacancies
- Biological sex-based rights and transgender rights
- Equality and human rights implications of artificial intelligence

It is clear that Dr Stephenson has extensive academic credibility in the field of women's rights and has an important contribution to make to public life. However, it is with regret that we do not feel we can endorse her appointment to the role at this time.

Our reasons relate to our concerns about vision and leadership, about breadth of expertise across the wide remit of the EHRC, and about rebuilding trust.

The EHRC is facing challenges on many fronts and in the current circumstances requires a chair with proven skills of running a large organisation, of being able to withstand intense scrutiny and to be able to advocate effectively on behalf of all protected groups, including some of the most vulnerable in society.

It needs a strong leader with a vision for what the organisation can achieve, and who can communicate it in an inspiring and compelling way. They should be able to advocate for it on the public stage and defend it in the media. The role description

calls for “the ability to lead and manage a major high-profile organisation, including chairing the board, providing effective challenge and support to the Executive.” Dr Stephenson did not provide sufficient evidence to convince us that she has yet acquired the skills and leadership experience necessary to carry out these functions.

The EHRC must enforce equality legislation on age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. The role description calls for “a credible understanding of and demonstrable commitment to equality and human rights.” Dr Stephenson impressed with her record of advocating for women’s rights - on which she should be commended - and her knowledge of equalities legislation. While we accept that no candidate is likely to have in-depth knowledge of every single area, she did not demonstrate a suitable depth of understanding of enough issues facing groups with other protected characteristics including race and disability. As such, we have concerns over her ability to enforce the rights of everyone.

The role description calls for “outstanding relationship building and communication skills, with the ability to command respect, build networks quickly and work with and through others to achieve objectives.” The debate in Parliament, in the press and on social media, as well as the volume of correspondence received by both Committees, make clear that the EHRC has lost the trust of some communities. This is not the fault of the candidate, but it does mean that whoever is appointed must be able to tackle this challenge. They should have a proven track record of engagement, with the ability to rebuild trust between the EHRC and those communities who no longer believe the organisation can protect their interests. They should also be able to engage constructively with people from all sides of debates which have become polarised. This will not be an easy task. Despite our questioning, and although she is clearly a person of good will, Dr Stephenson did not persuade us that she will be able to rebuild trust in the organisation.

Other significant issues were also raised during our session with Dr Stephenson. It is clear to us that the current situation of multiple vacancies on the EHRC board is untenable. We agree with Dr Stephenson that those vacancies should be filled by people who have the ability to provide challenge to the chair, who come from a range of backgrounds, including in terms of politics and class, and who have in depth knowledge and understanding of the discrimination faced by specific groups with protected characteristics.

We are also worried that the EHRC may not have the budget it needs to carry out its functions effectively. Dr Stephenson rightly alluded to the need for the EHRC to prioritise particular workstreams due to the budgetary constraints under which it operates. The EHRC’s budget was over £70m in 2010 and is now £17.8m. It was reduced to £17m after a budget review published in 2013 and has remained broadly flat ever since.

As the Minister responsible for the EHRC we ask you to consider whether it has the resources and capacity it needs to carry out its work and be able to meet the

challenges presented by emerging technologies, particularly as you consider placing new duties on the EHRC, such as race and disability pay gap monitoring and enforcing the socioeconomic duty.

The EHRC is a vitally important body, forming a key part of the protection our country provides on matters relating to human rights and equalities. It is for this reason that we would like to invite you to reconsider your decision to appoint Dr Stephenson, and propose an alternative candidate for the role, if necessary by re-opening the recruitment process.

We are clear on what attributes an incoming chair of the EHRC should have and we would like to invite you to involve the two Committees more closely in the appointment process for this role in future.

We would like to explore with you the way in which this process operates, in the light of several previous instances where concerns were raised by our predecessor Committees. We would both be happy to discuss this with you and your officials.

We do not intend to put this letter in the public domain.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "David Alton." The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'D'.

Lord Alton of Liverpool

Chair, Joint Committee on Human Rights

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Sarah Owen". The signature is cursive, with the first name "Sarah" and the last name "Owen" clearly visible.

Sarah Owen MP

Chair, Women and Equalities Committee



Office for
Equality and
Opportunity

Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP
Minister for Women and Equalities
Cabinet Office
70 Whitehall
London
SW1A 2AS

Lord Alton
Chair, Joint Committee on Human Rights
By email: jchr@parliament.uk
Sarah Owen MP
Chair, Women and Equalities Select Committee
By email: womeqcom@parliament.uk

17 July 2025

Dear David and Sarah,

Thank you for confirming yesterday that your letter of 2 July 2025 will act as the Committees' formal response to the pre-appointment hearing of Dr Mary-Ann Stephenson for the role of Chair of the EHRC.

I have noted the points that were raised by your committees, and I will consider these alongside the evidence gathered throughout the wider process ahead of taking my final decision. I appreciate your engagement as part of this process.

I will write back to you once I have made my decision.

Yours sincerely,

Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP
Minister for Women and Equalities and Secretary of State for Education