



Women and Equalities Committee

House of Commons London SW1A 0AA

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From the Chair

Rt Hon Elizabeth Truss MP
Minister for Women and Equalities
Government Equalities Office
(By e-mail)

28 April 2021

Dear Liz,

Relationship between the Women and Equalities Committee and the Government Equalities Office

I have become concerned in recent months about the approach being taken by the GEO and its Ministers to my Committee and its essential scrutiny work. We have become increasingly frustrated by a lack of positive engagement from Ministers and note that a growing public perception of Government intransigence on equalities issues is being reflected in our own relationship.

Our first concern relates to the timeliness of your responses to our reports. You will be aware that the Government has undertaken to reply to recommendations in reports from select committees which are directed to it within two months of publication. We received your complete response to our report *Unequal impact? Coronavirus, disability and access to services* on 30 March, having initially expected it on 22 February. We are still awaiting your response to our report *Unequal impact? Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact*. This was due on 9th April, and so at the time of writing is almost three weeks late. The reasons given for the delays have largely related to the difficulty of coordinating responses across Government departments. We take a dim view of this response given a primary function of the GEO is to coordinate equalities issues across Government.

We have also experienced difficulty when seeking ministerial attendance at our evidence sessions. We were unable to agree any suitable dates for the Minister for Women or Minister for Equalities to give evidence as part of our inquiry into the GEO, despite giving three months' notice of the session and offering six alternatives. Furthermore, no GEO minister was available to attend the final session of our inquiry into Body Image, and we are still awaiting your response to our invitation on 26 March to give evidence to our Gender Recognition Act inquiry. While scheduling reasons have been given on each

occasion, a clear pattern is emerging which is limiting our ability to scrutinise Government effectively and positively contribute to the policy development process.

Finally, we have been unable to secure timely replies to our correspondence to you, your ministerial colleagues, and your officials. For example, we wrote to you regarding the LGBT Action Plan on 24 February but have not yet received your response, despite confirming our expectation of such on 15 April. On 12 February, we wrote to the Director of the Equality Hub requesting basic information about its structure and staffing, requesting a reply by 12 March and receiving an unsatisfactory response on 30 March.

We appreciate that the last year has presented unique challenges and have shown patience on this basis. We also note, however, that our relationships with other Government departments, with which we have fewer interactions and less established relationships, have not been characterised by the issues highlighted above.

I hope you will now take steps to swiftly resolve both the general and specific issues outlined in this letter. I have copied this letter to Minister Badenoch and Minister Berridge given the pertinence of its contents to their work and hope they will take steps to do the same.

I look forward to building a more positive and cooperative relationship in the future.

In accordance with our usual practice, this letter, along with your reply, will be published on the Committee's webpage.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Caroline".

Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP
Chair, Women and Equalities Committee

CC: Kemi Badenoch MP
Minister for Equalities
Government Equalities Office

Baroness Berridge of The Vale of Catmose
Minister for Women
Government Equalities Office