



Women and Equalities Committee

House of Commons London SW1A 0AA

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From the Chair

Rt Hon Theresa May MP
(by email)

19 July 2021

Women and Equalities Committee inquiries into the role of the Government Equalities Office; and reform of the Gender Recognition Act

Dear Theresa,

My Committee has been inquiring into the *role of the Government Equalities Office (GEO): embedding equalities across government*, and simultaneously conducting an inquiry into *reform of the Gender Recognition Act (GRA)*. As you know, we had hoped to hear oral evidence this week from a panel of former Ministers for Women and Equalities. The session would have been framed within the terms of reference of our GEO inquiry, with some questions drawing on its handling of GRA reform, by way of a case study. In the event, we have been unable to assemble a panel for oral evidence and instead are gathering the views of ex-ministers in writing. I understand that you have indicated your willingness to submit written evidence.

You will be aware that, since the last Women and Equalities Committee considered the GEO's role and place in government in 2018, there has been a key machinery of government change. As recommended by the last Committee, the GEO now has a permanent home in the Cabinet Office and forms part of the Equality Hub, alongside the Race Disparity Unit and the Disability Unit.

Other recommendations have not been taken forward, notably that: the role of Minister for Women and Equalities become a full-time Cabinet post in its own right; that the Government publish a cross-government equalities strategy against which it can be held to account; and that a Cabinet Committee on equalities be established.

There have also been significant policy changes. The Government's position on GRA reform, a priority under your administration, has shifted substantially, with the Minister for Women and Equalities announcing, in response to the consultation launched in 2018, that the government would not make changes to the legislative framework for gender reassignment.

There is also a perception, perhaps fuelled by communications around the findings of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities' report, that racial and ethnic inequalities, also a key focus under your premiership, now have less priority in government.

The current Minister for Women and Equalities set out her vision for the equality agenda in December 2020, when she emphasised the importance of understanding and acting to address inequality of opportunity "from the perspective of the individual, not groups", with a particular focus on socio-economic and geographic factors. Government sponsorship of the Social Mobility Commission has moved from the Department for Education to the Equality Hub, and now falls under our scrutiny remit.

This is the context in which we are seeking your views, drawing on your experience both as Prime Minister at the time of the GRA reform consultation and a former Minister for Women and Equalities. We would be very grateful to receive your written evidence addressing any or all of the terms of reference for our inquiries,¹ or you may wish to frame your response by replying to some or all of the following questions:

Question 1: A key aim of the 2018 GRA consultation was to seek ways of making the gender reassignment process "less intrusive and bureaucratic". To what extent will this aim be achieved by the process changes (moving the process online and reducing the fee for a Gender Recognition Certificate) announced in September 2020?

- Can a less intrusive process be achieved without legislative reform of the Act? If not, which changes to the legislation are essential to achieve this aim?

Question 2: The debate about GRA reform has been protracted and acrimonious. Are there lessons from this for how delicately balanced rights issues are handled by the GEO in future?

- Were there missed opportunities to identify and build common ground between groups with opposing views?
- Could or should the Equality and Human Rights Commission have played a greater role in bringing stakeholders together and identifying common ground?

Question 3: The Government has announced that it will shortly be launching a consultation on banning conversion therapy. In your view, what are the key considerations for the Government in running an effective consultation on this issue?

¹ Call for evidence: [the role of the GEO](#); Inquiry launch press release: [Reform of the GRA](#)

- Some stakeholders have expressed frustration about the Government's plan to launch a consultation on conversion therapy and are concerned it will lead to undue delay and risk diluting government action. What is your view?

Question 4: The GEO moved into the Equality Hub, based in the Cabinet Office, in 2019, as recommended by our predecessor Committee. Is the Cabinet Office the right place for the GEO and Equality Hub?

- Have any benefits of the move been realised yet?
- Are there potential downsides, for example is there a risk that the GEO loses its own corporate identity and becomes less transparent and less accountable?

Question 5: During your time as Minister for Women and Equalities, what were the most effective mechanisms for driving equality issues across government?

- To what extent did Cabinet Committees have a role in driving the equality agenda across government?
- Our predecessor Committee recommended the establishment of a dedicated Cabinet Committee on equality issues. Would that be effective?
- In your experience, were cross-departmental inter-ministerial groups an effective mechanism for driving progress on cross-government equality issues? Can you give examples?

Question 6: Given the Minister for Women and Equalities role is a dual role held by a Cabinet Minister with another brief, does the post-holder have sufficient time to focus on and drive forward difficult equality issues such as GRA reform?

Question 7: Given the equalities issues that have arisen during the pandemic (for women, for younger and older people, for disabled people and ethnic minorities) is there now a stronger case for having a full-time equalities minister at Cabinet level?

Question 8: The current Minister for Women and Equalities intends to focus on equality of opportunity for individuals, with a particular focus on life-path analysis of socio-economic and geographic inequality. How do you think this new approach will affect government focus on inequalities experienced by groups protected under the Equality Act?

- Can the conventional approach to equalities, as framed in the Equality Act and Public Sector Equality Duty, be successfully embedded into the Government's new approach?

Question 9: Under your administration, the Race Disparity Audit led to the Ethnicity Facts and Figures data series, which sets out a wealth of information on inequalities

experienced by different ethnic groups. Are you concerned that the Government's new approach risks side-lining this work and delaying action to address known inequalities?

I would very much value your thoughts on these issues, and I look forward to your reply. Many thanks for engaging with our work.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Caroline". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP
Chair, Women and Equalities Committee