



House of Commons
Women and Equalities
Committee

**Levelling Up and
equality: a new
framework for change:
Government response
to the Committee's first
report**

**Third Special Report of Session 2021–
22**

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Women and Equalities Committee

The Women and Equalities Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Government Equalities Office (GEO).

Current membership

[Caroline Nokes MP](#) (*Conservative, Romsey and Southampton North*) (Chair)

[Lee Anderson MP](#) (*Conservative, Ashfield*)

[Theo Clarke MP](#) (*Conservative, Stafford*)

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Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No. 152. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

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Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at www.parliament.uk/womenandequalities and in print by Order of the House.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Hannah Barlow (Committee Operations Manager), James Clarke (Committee Specialist), Matthew Eaton (Committee Specialist), Radhika Handa (Second Clerk), Michelle Garratty (Committee Operations Officer), Mariam Keating (Committee Specialist), and Margaret McKinnon (Clerk).

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You can follow the Committee on Twitter using [@Commonswomequ](https://twitter.com/Commonswomequ).

Third Special Report

The Women Committee published its First Report of Session 2021–22, [Levelling Up and equality: a new framework for change](#) (HC 702), on 24 September 2021. The Government response was received on 23 November 2021 and is appended below.

Appendix: Government Response

Introduction

1. The Government welcomes the Women and Equalities Select Committee's report, *Levelling Up and equality: a new framework for change*. We are grateful to the committee for their recommendations and to those who provided evidence.
2. Since the Committee's previous report on *The role of the Minister for Women and Equalities and the place of the GEO in Government* in May 2018, the Government Equalities Office (GEO) has found a permanent home in the Cabinet Office as part of the Equality Hub. The Equality Hub brings together the expertise of the Disability Unit, Government Equalities Office, Race Disparity Unit and, most recently, the Social Mobility Commission. It is overseen by five Ministers who are all invested in ensuring that the level of commitment to this work continues to a high standard.
3. As the Committee alludes to in the report, the Government has taken great strides in ensuring that the Equality Hub takes a broader view of equality issues and is a central hub for tackling inequalities.
4. In December 2020, the Minister for Women and Equalities Liz Truss announced a new approach to equality, extending the fight for fairness beyond the nine protected characteristics covered by the Equality Act 2010 to also include socio-economic and geographic inequality. This new approach will focus on improving the quality of evidence and data about disparities and the types of barriers different people face, whilst ensuring that fairness is central to all policies and initiatives.
5. Alongside the new focus on socio-economic background and geography, we are committed to continuing the Equality Hub's work related to race and ethnic disparities, women's economic empowerment, disability and LGBT rights. Throughout the pandemic, the Equality Hub has helped shape policies to ensure that the needs of people from vulnerable groups were considered. As we build back better, we are looking at ways to offer everyone equal access to opportunities in the workplace, including to tackle challenges that women face, which have been exacerbated by the pandemic. This builds on work to address the causes of the gender pay gap - such as occupational and industrial segregation - and initiatives across Government to make workplaces more flexible and fairer for everyone. The Equality Hub is also providing valuable input to shape work such as the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Strategy and Online Safety Bill to help keep people safe in all areas of their lives.
6. Being part of the Cabinet Office provides a cross-Government platform, allowing for influence across departments that have responsibility for specific parts of the equality framework and/or areas of wider policy and delivery that make a real difference on the

ground. Since this structural change, the Equality Hub has driven forward the equality agenda at pace - for example, supporting our Presidency of the G7 this year to champion the rights of women and girls at home and around the world. Sponsored by the Minister for Women and Equalities, the independent Gender Equality Advisory Council (GEAC) presented its recommendations to G7 Leaders at the Carbis Bay Summit in June, with a strong call to action on building back better for women and girls. Some of the core themes from those recommendations were reflected in the G7 Leaders' Communiqué, including a specific focus on strengthening the international architecture on conflict-related sexual violence, and developing a mechanism to monitor G7 progress and implementation of commitments on gender equality. The GEACs' full report, published on 28 October, adds further weight to their recommendations, drawing on data and evidence to make the case.

7. The Equality Hub will also bring forward legislation to ban conversion therapy, as set out in the Queen's Speech. A public consultation on our proposals for the ban was launched on 29 October, closing on 10 December. This will enable us to hear from a wide range of voices on how best to protect people from demonstrable harm while upholding clinical practice in the medical profession and protecting personal freedoms.

8. The Equality Hub is also leading on valuable work to address COVID-19 disparities, especially in relation to ethnicity and disability. We have worked closely with colleagues across Whitehall, the Office for National Statistics (ONS), the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies Ethnicity subgroup and with academics to collate the latest data on COVID-19 disparities and, where possible, to identify and address any gaps in this. In the longer term, the new Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, launched on 1 October, will be addressing disparities in health outcomes as a priority. We are monitoring the impact of COVID-19 on disabled people, and those with health conditions, using a range of sources, including an evidence programme with the ONS, and regular engagement with disabled people and disability stakeholders. This data is being shared with other Government departments to influence and inform decisions.

9. Supporting the Government's manifesto commitment to improve the quality of data and evidence within Government about the types of barriers different groups face, the Equality Hub will continue to provide an integrated data and analysis function. The Hub will provide rich evidence about equality and inequality across several dimensions, including socio-economic, spatial inequality and protected characteristics, to support policy delivery across Government. This is alongside continuing its responsibility for equality legislation and delivering a number of policy projects, as set out in the Cabinet Office Outcome Delivery Plan.

10. A response to each of the Committee's recommendations can be found below.

Equality Hub: transparency and accountability

The Cabinet Office must publish annual information on staffing and funding of the Equality Hub, its constituent units (the Government Equalities Office, the Disability Unit, the Race Disparity Unit and the Social Mobility Commission), broken down by administration, projects and programmes. This could be either in its annual Outcome Delivery Plans or in a separate Equality Hub document, but the information must be proactively published in the interests of transparency and accountability.

11. The Equality Hub currently publishes annual information on staffing and funding as part of the Cabinet Office annual report. The level of detail is determined by the Cabinet Office and not by business units. The Equality Hub will continue to comply with Cabinet Office requirements on publication. To support the Committee's scrutiny of the Equality Hub, if it would be helpful, further information can be provided to the Committee Chair by the Hub's Director on a bi-annual basis.

Scrutiny role and the Government's engagement with the work of the Committee

We recommend the Government bring forward a revised Standing Order, to make the Women and Equalities Committee a cross-cutting Select Committee of the House of Commons, appointed to examine cross-Government policy on pan-equalities issues, and socio-economic inequality, geographic disparities and social mobility.

We ask that the Government set out in response to this Report a renewed commitment to engage properly with our work, including through timely submission of written evidence systematically addressing our terms of reference, a renewed acceptance by ministers of their public duty to give oral evidence as invited with reasonable notice, and by responding fully and constructively to our Reports within the conventional two months of publication.

12. We acknowledge the Committee's recommendation regarding the Equality Hub's engagement with the work of the Committee. We recognise how important it is for departments to be held accountable, and that scrutinising the role of the GEO, and the wider Equality Hub, is a core element of the Committee's functions. The Government wholly commits to engaging fully with the Committee and continuing to build a constructive relationship.

13. The Government does not agree that changes to the standing orders are required. The Women and Equalities Select Committee has been a key feature of the departmental committee landscape since it was established on 3 June 2015, being made a permanent select committee on 4 July 2017. Its role, as set out under Standing Order 152, to examine the "expenditure, administration and policy" of the GEO "and associated public bodies" already allows the Committee significant flexibility. Moreover, it is open to Committees to interpret their remit within the broad terms of reference set out in their standing orders, as the Committee has already shown itself able to do through its work scrutinising the wider Equality Hub and other aspects of the Government's equalities agenda. Additionally, the Committee already has the power under Standing Order 137A to work with other Committees, should those Committees wish to, in areas of overlap.

Coherent Strategies and Action Plans for equalities and levelling up

The Equality Data Programme should be seized as an opportunity for the Government to set out, together with its proposed Levelling Up policies, a cross-departmental pan-equalities strategy based on data on the full range of factors that drive disadvantage, including protected characteristics under the Equality Act and the intersections between them and other factors. We recommend the Equality Hub publish a cross-departmental pan-equalities strategy by the end of the first quarter of 2022, covering the period to at least the end of this Parliament. To raise its profile and inform the longer-term development of its strategy, we

recommend the Equality Hub publish a schedule of public and stakeholder events covering a range of equalities issues. We further recommend it publish annual Action Plans, setting out specific and measurable steps it will take in each financial year to meet its strategic equality objectives.

While enactment of the socio-economic duty, section 1 of the Equality Act, is unlikely to be a panacea, we recommend the Government commission a pilot to establish the costs and benefits of different approaches to voluntary adoption of the duty in England.

14. We recognise the Committee's interest and recommendation for a cross-departmental pan-equalities strategy. As the Equality Hub is a component of the Cabinet Office, it is only right that its aims and objectives form part of the Cabinet Office's wider Outcome Delivery Plan. In line with wider Cabinet Office requirements, the Equality Hub is held to account by a robust governance system to ensure assurance, accountability and transparency. The Outcome Delivery Plan for 2021–2022 was published on 15 July 2021, accessible here, and outlines the following strategic aims and objectives of the Hub, as a core section of the overall Plan:

- a) Lead work to analyse and tackle disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 for ethnic minority and disabled people.
- b) Examine inequality in the UK, across the whole population through delivery and responding to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities.
- c) Improve the quality of evidence and data in Government about the types of barriers different groups face through the Equality Data Programme and other related initiatives.
- d) Work with DWP to implement the National Strategy for Disabled People.
- e) Promote gender equality in the COVID-19 recovery, by working to increase women's economic participation, and reduce occupational segregation.
- f) Legislating to ban conversion therapy, including consulting widely, and putting in place support for victims.
- g) Reduce bureaucracy in the gender recognition process through digitisation and reducing the fees for GRC application.
- h) Promote international action to protect and promote the rights of LGBT people, including through successful delivery of an international conference.
- i) Through the work of the Social Mobility Commission, assess progress on improving social mobility, provide published advice to ministers, and carry out social mobility advocacy.

15. These strategic aims and objectives are underpinned by appropriate workstreams, some of which involve specific targeted strategies.

16. The National Disability Strategy (NDS) was published on 28 July and it sets out a wide range of practical actions to improve the lives of disabled people across jobs, housing, transport, education, shopping, culture, justice, public services, and data and evidence. The Strategy's breadth was informed by one of the biggest listening exercises with disabled people in our recent history.

17. The Strategy sets out over 100 immediate commitments supported by £1.6bn of funding alongside an ambitious agenda for future reform, including a multi-year data programme to improve the availability, quality and relevance of information which will drive policy making across Government.

18. Some of the key projects that will be delivered under the NDS include a UK-wide campaign to increase public awareness and understanding of disability, dispel ingrained and unhelpful stereotypes and promote the diverse contributions disabled people have made – and continue to make – to public life. The Equality Hub will also consult later this year on workforce reporting on disability for large employers, exploring voluntary and mandated workplace transparency, to gather evidence and views before publishing next steps. We will also develop a new, cross-Government evidence and data strategy, including research into people's experiences, improved and more comparable cross-Government data, and regular public perceptions tracking of disabled and non-disabled people. The project will help deliver on the manifesto commitments to improve the evidence on equality and to support levelling up across the country.

19. The independent Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities published its report in March this year. The report makes an important contribution to both the national conversation about race, and the Government's efforts to level up and unite the whole country. The Commission has made 24 recommendations across all the policy areas set out in their Terms of References, and more besides. These have been grouped in four broad themes: to build trust; promote fairness; create agency; and to achieve inclusivity.

20. Given the extensive scope of recommendations, the Prime Minister established an Inter-Ministerial Group to review the Commission's recommendations. This is chaired by the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, with the Minister for Levelling Up Communities and Equalities as a standing member, and other Ministers involved for the different recommendations.

21. Our response to the Sewell Commission's report will set out an action plan for promoting racial equality in line with our levelling up agenda. We will publish the Government response in due course.

22. The Government agrees that data and evidence are key in driving our equality agenda and ensuring those in disadvantaged groups are supported. We believe the most effective way to deliver this is by moving beyond the exclusive focus on protected characteristics to also consider socio-economic and geographic inequality and deliver real change that benefits people across the United Kingdom. This new approach to equality will focus on improving the quality of evidence and data about disparities and the types of barriers different people face, whilst ensuring that fairness is central to all policies or initiatives. This approach is being delivered in partnership with ONS including the development of an Equality Data Asset (part of ONS' Integrated Data Service) that links data so that

better, more granular, information is available. The evidence from our new Equality Data Programme will support the development of policy across Government to make the UK a fairer place to live and do business.

23. This Government remains fully committed to building back fairer, tackling discrimination of all forms and taking the action needed to address negative disparities wherever they exist. We do not believe that a pilot to establish the costs and benefits of different approaches to voluntary adoption of Section 1 of the Equality Act in England is necessary or appropriate at this time. Before considering the usefulness of any potential pilot scheme, we would first want to look at any evaluation of how the duty is already working in devolved public bodies and the English local authorities who have introduced it on a voluntary basis. The GEO will liaise as necessary with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the Scotland and Wales Offices to monitor any outcomes from these initiatives.

Ministerial roles and equalities machinery in Government

We recommend the Government create a new full-time Cabinet level role of Secretary of State for Equalities and Levelling Up, to drive implementation of the expected Levelling Up White Paper and a new cross-departmental pan-equalities strategy. These should be considered complementary, high priority agendas, which should be driven from the heart of Government. Consideration should also be given to bringing the more junior roles of Minister for Women, Minister for Equalities and Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work into the Cabinet Office on a full-time basis.

We note both the current absence of a cross-departmental equalities strategy and strong coordinating machinery to drive it forward. We therefore recommend the Government establish a dedicated Cabinet Committee for Equalities and Levelling Up, to add further drive to both agendas across Government.

24. In the recent reshuffle, the Prime Minister created a new Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. The Secretary of State will play a key role driving forward the levelling up agenda and in tackling inequality, supported by the Minister of State for Equalities who has a joint portfolio across these issues. This is also reflected in the Secretary of State's role leading the Inter Ministerial Group reviewing the recommendations from Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. The portfolios of Ministers and remits of Cabinet Committees are the prerogative of the Prime Minister. Therefore, we will not be taking forward the recommendations proposed by the Committee on these points.

25. Equality Hub Ministers are based in several different Government Departments. This means that equalities issues are not siloed and instead, it enables Ministers to embed issues relating to this area across Government. Each member of the Equalities Ministerial team is fully committed to their equalities portfolio. Cabinet and its Committees provide a framework for Ministers to consider and make collective decisions on policy issues, covering the full range of Government business, including issues of equality and fairness.

Learning lessons from the Government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic has clearly demonstrated the need for robustly conducted and published Equality Impact Assessments of general policies which could have significant unequal effects on groups who already face disadvantage in society. The Equality Hub must be a strong advocate across Government for this and, with the support of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, proactively provide expert advice to departments on effective use and publication of Equality Impact Assessments.

The Government must ensure that its effectiveness in anticipating, recognising and mitigating inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic is included in the terms of reference for the statutory public inquiry due to begin its work in 2022.

The Equality Hub must be given a central role in the development and ongoing review of the National Risk Register, with the aim of ensuring equality issues are fully considered, at the earliest possible stage and based on robust data, in future emergency responses.

26. Public authorities should be able to demonstrate that they have had due regard to equality considerations when carrying out their functions, and to ensure that this consideration is an integral part of policy development and decision-making. The legal requirement under the Equality Act is to have “due regard” to equality considerations; although regulations have been made enabling better performance of the duty, no specific action or activity is prescribed to demonstrate that due regard has been had. However, the courts have made clear that recording the steps taken by any decision-maker (including Ministers) in seeking to meet the duty is an important evidential element in compliance.

27. This means there is no legal requirement for equalities consideration to be recorded in a specific format - whether in the form of an equality impact assessment, evaluating the impact of the change in relation to each protected characteristic, or as an element of a broader submission, or otherwise. A systematic approach is good practice because it is easier to demonstrate compliance if it can be shown that the relevant questions were addressed at the right stage.

28. The Government agrees it is important for the Equality Hub to show leadership on how departments can be assured that they are meeting their obligations under the public sector equality duty (PSED). The Equality Hub is taking a number of steps to drive effective action across Government. The Hub co-ordinates a cross-Government PSED Network on the implementation of the duty, through sharing expertise, resources and best practice the Network supports departments to effectively comply. In addition, the Hub plays an ongoing role in providing advice, including legal advice, to Government departments. This has included supporting the COVID-19 Taskforce to co-ordinate cross-Government PSED assessments for changes to COVID-19 Regulations over recent months.

29. The Equality Hub will continue to play an active role in ensuring that the Government is fulfilling its obligations under PSED. The Minister for Levelling Up and Equalities will shortly be writing to each department at a Ministerial level on the duty, to provide advice on how to meet their obligations and on completing assessments. We will share a copy of this letter with the Committee. The Hub's legal team will continue to provide legal

advice to departmental lawyers in relation to the PSED and our work on the Equality Data Programme and cross-Government initiatives such as the National Disability Strategy will inform and drive policy responses from other departments.

30. The public inquiry into the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic will be established on a statutory basis, with full powers under the Inquiries Act of 2005 and will commence in the Spring. It will be a thorough examination of the breadth of our response – to learn the lessons of the pandemic that will make a difference to the future. Making the right decisions on the inquiry’s scope will be crucial to its success. For that reason, the Prime Minister has confirmed that bereaved families and other groups will be consulted before terms of reference are finalised. Further details will be announced in due course.

31. The Government is looking to improve how the disproportionate impacts of risks affecting vulnerable people are considered during the ongoing review of the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA). This will be reflected in the public facing National Risk Register (NRR) which is based on the NSRA. The Equality Hub has already been involved in the review so far and will continue to play an important role in the next NSRA.

32. The Cabinet Office will be updating guidance to risk-owning departments to help them to consider the impact of risks on vulnerable groups beyond the protected characteristics, as had been the case in the 2019 NSRA. There will be a role for the Equality Hub as part of this work. Additionally, the Cabinet Office is engaging with the ONS on ways to improve data input across the NSRA more broadly.

Oversight and implementation of the UK’s international equality commitments

The new equalities strategy and annual Action Plans should set out actions to be taken to meet the UK’s international equality commitments. Further, the Government should, as recommended by the UN and the Equality and Human Rights Commission, establish a National Mechanism for Implementation, Reporting and Follow-up, to ensure the most effective possible engagement with international equality and human rights conventions and treaties. Consideration should also be given to restructuring current processes, which are fragmented across several departments, and bringing oversight into a single international compliance team in the Equality Hub.

33. The Equality Hub has responsibility for oversight of the UK’s international commitments that arise by virtue of our ratification of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Equality Hub works effectively and collaboratively with other Government departments, such as the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), to meet the UK’s international equality commitments and provide timely reporting to the various treaty committees.

34. For example, where treaties reference violence against women and girls, the Equality Hub engages with colleagues in the Home Office and FCDO. Any monitoring mechanism would need to engage extensively with a wide range of departments to ensure that a comprehensive response is produced. The UK Government therefore already ensures adherence to our international obligations and that we meet the requirements of the treaty bodies.

35. These Conventions are applicable across the UK, including the devolved administrations, and across a range of departmental responsibilities. The UK Government will therefore continue to work collaboratively with the other nations of the UK to provide accurate information to the UN and other international bodies.

A refreshed approach to stakeholder engagement and communications on sensitive issues

The Equality Hub should conduct a review of the Government's communications on, and management of, sensitive and balanced rights issues, drawing in particular on lessons learned from the Gender Recognition Act reform process since 2018 and the Government's approach to communicating the findings of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities.

We recommend the Government invite the Equality and Human Rights Commission to engage with a range of stakeholders to seek common ground on the most difficult balanced rights issues. The new equalities strategy should set out a programme of such stakeholder engagement on the most pressing issues, for example the interplay between options for GRA reform and women's rights to single-sex spaces, services and sports. It should also set out clear principles to underpin the choice of ministerial advisory panels and on which issues they should be appointed to advise.

36. The Committee rightly notes that equality issues by their nature often require wide engagement and sensitive handling. To support this, effective stakeholder engagement as well as careful communications are required. The Equality Hub interacts regularly with a wide range of stakeholders across equality issues, ensuring that it factors in all relevant views to its work. For example, to support the COVID-19 pandemic response, the Equality Hub has led a programme of engagement with external stakeholders which is detailed in the [published quarterly reports on COVID-19 disparities](#). This programme comprises working groups, bilateral meetings, conference speeches and targeted roundtables with a range of stakeholders including the British Medical Association, National Pharmacy Association, Bangladeshi caterers and midwives from Birmingham, and East London NHS Trusts.

37. The Equality Hub engaged with just under 140 organisations before and during the Gender Recognition Act consultation period, including LGBT groups, women's groups, faith groups, other Government departments, foreign Governments and other civil society organisations. As we run the consultation phase for our ban on conversion therapy, we continue to engage closely with a similarly broad range of interested groups, as well as with victims of these practices, to ensure our policy is informed and effective. We remain alive to the need to hear a diverse range of voices and views, while also ensuring sensitivity in how we hold these conversations, including with people directly affected.

38. The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities drafted its report after a period of significant engagement which included a call for evidence that received over 2,300 responses. It is an independent commission and communications work for the publication of the Commission's report on 31 March 2021 were likewise planned independently. A statement given by the Commission on 2 April stated that following publication of the report, disagreements with their views had tipped into wilful misrepresentation. This reflects the challenge of managing communications and anticipating social media commentary, especially where emotions are heightened. We share the Committee's

concerns as to the polarised debates that have intensified around these sensitive issues. We have publicly urged all those involved in debates on these important and emotive issues to show tolerance and respect for different perspectives and views.

39. The Government is always interested in learning lessons wherever it should. Alongside health and economic challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic posed a public communications challenge to ensure that people in all corners of the country including those who lack trust in Government, received a clear message about matters which had a bearing on issues such as community, family, housing and faith. The Minister of State for Equalities' quarterly reports into COVID disparities have included an exploration into how we can improve our communications to under-served groups. Recommendations have covered issues such as community and stakeholder engagement, nuancing of messages, partnerships with trusted advocates, disaggregation of audiences, diversification of channels, expansion of translations and formats, avoiding stigmatisation and dispelling myths.

40. The final report with a summary of proposals and actions for improving Government communications to diverse audiences on sensitive issues, will be published soon. Given this, the Government does not see a compelling need for an additional review as suggested by the Committee.

41. Likewise, with regard to the Committee's recommendation to invite the Equality and Human Rights Committee (EHRC) to engage with stakeholders, we do not see this as an additional need or new activity. The EHRC wrote to the Committee [on this matter](#). The Government echoes the EHRC's point that this is something the Commission takes into consideration through its day-to-day operation.

42. Regular engagement with stakeholders is part of the Equality Hub's policy making. This includes individual contacts, roundtables, consultations, and input from experts - ensuring we hear from the full range of voices especially on contentious or polarised issues. Our approach is both proactive, for example with conversion therapy policy, and reactive, for example in relation to the Afghanistan Resettlement Programme - we have to be responsive, and that is the right approach.

Table A - Government responses to Report recommendations

Recommendation	Response
Equality Hub: transparency and accountability	
<p>The Cabinet Office must publish annual information on staffing and funding of the Equality Hub, its constituent units (the Government Equalities Office, the Disability Unit, the Race Disparity Unit and the Social Mobility Commission), broken down by administration, projects and programmes. This could be either in its annual Outcome Delivery Plans or in a separate Equality Hub document, but the information must be proactively published in the interests of transparency and accountability. (Paragraph 54).</p>	<p>Accept in part.</p> <p>The Equality Hub currently publishes annual information on staffing and funding as part of the Cabinet Office annual report. The Equality Hub will continue to comply with Cabinet Office requirements on publication. To support the Committee’s scrutiny of the Equality Hub, further information can be provided by the Hub’s Director on a bi-annual basis.</p>
Our scrutiny role and the Government’s engagement with our work	
<p>We recommend the Government bring forward a revised Standing Order, to make the Women and Equalities Committee a cross-cutting Select Committee of the House of Commons, appointed to examine cross-government policy on pan-equalities issues, and socio-economic inequality, geographic disparities and social mobility. (Paragraph 56).</p>	<p>Reject.</p> <p>The Women and Equalities Committee’s role, as set out under Standing Order 152, to examine the “expenditure, administration and policy” of the GEO “and associated public bodies” already allows the Committee significant flexibility. Committees are able to interpret their remit within the broad terms of reference set out in their standing orders, as the Committee has already shown itself able to do through its work scrutinising the Equality Hub and other aspects of the Government’s equalities agenda.</p>
<p>We ask that the Government set out in response to this Report a renewed commitment to engage properly with our work, including through timely submission of written evidence systematically addressing our terms of reference, a renewed acceptance by ministers of their public duty to give oral evidence as invited with reasonable notice, and by responding fully and constructively to our Reports within the conventional two months of publication. (Paragraph 57).</p>	<p>Accept.</p> <p>The Government commits to engaging fully with the Committee and continuing to build a constructive relationship.</p>

Coherent strategies and Action Plans for equalities and Levelling Up	
<p>While enactment of the socio-economic duty, section 1 of the Equality Act, is unlikely to be a panacea, we recommend the Government commission a pilot to establish the costs and benefits of different approaches to voluntary adoption of the duty in England. (Paragraph 59).</p>	<p>Reject.</p> <p>We do not believe that a pilot to establish the costs and benefits of different approaches to voluntary adoption of Section 1 of the Equality Act in England is necessary at this time. Before considering the usefulness of a pilot scheme, we would first want to look at any evaluation of how the duty is already working in devolved public bodies and a few English local authorities who have introduced it on a voluntary basis.</p>
<p>The Equality Data Programme should be seized as an opportunity for the Government to set out, together with its proposed Levelling Up policies, a cross-departmental pan-equalities strategy based on data on the full range of factors that drive disadvantage, including protected characteristics under the Equality Act and the intersections between them and other factors. We recommend the Equality Hub publish a cross-departmental pan-equalities strategy by the end of the first quarter of 2022, covering the period to at least the end of this Parliament. To raise its profile and inform the longer-term development of its strategy, we recommend the Equality Hub publish a schedule of public and stakeholder events covering a range of equalities issues. We further recommend it publish annual Action Plans, setting out specific and measurable steps it will take in each financial year to meet its strategic equality objectives. (Paragraph 60).</p>	<p>Reject.</p> <p>As the Equality Hub is a component of the Cabinet Office, its aims and objectives form part of the Cabinet Office’s wider Outcome Delivery Plan. The Outcome Delivery Plan for 2021-2022 was published on 15 July 2021, and outlines detailed strategic aims and objectives of the Hub.</p> <p>These objectives are underpinned by additional strategies - including the National Disability Strategy and the forthcoming Government Response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities.</p>

Ministerial roles and equalities machinery in Government

We recommend the Government create a new full-time Cabinet level role of Secretary of State for Equalities and Levelling Up, to drive implementation of the expected Levelling Up White Paper and a new cross-departmental pan-equalities strategy. These should be considered complementary, high priority agendas, which should be driven from the heart of Government. Consideration should also be given to bringing the more junior roles of Minister for Women, Minister for Equalities and Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work into the Cabinet Office on a full-time basis. (Paragraph 61).

Reject.

The portfolios of Ministers and Cabinet Committees are the prerogative of the Prime Minister.

We note both the current absence of a cross-departmental equalities strategy and strong coordinating machinery to drive it forward. We therefore recommend the Government establish a dedicated Cabinet Committee for Equalities and Levelling Up, to add further drive to both agendas across Government. (Paragraph 62).

Reject.

The portfolios of Ministers and Cabinet Committees are the prerogative of the Prime Minister.

Learning lessons from the Government’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic has clearly demonstrated the need for robustly conducted and published Equality Impact Assessments of general policies which could have significant unequal effects on groups who already face disadvantage in society. The Equality Hub must be a strong advocate across Government for this and, with the support of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, proactively provide expert advice to departments on effective use and publication of Equality Impact Assessments. (Paragraph 63).

Accept in part.

The Government agrees it is important for the Equality Hub to provide leadership on how best departments can assure themselves that they are meeting their obligations under the public sector equality duty (PSED). The Equality Hub is taking a number of steps to drive effective action across Government.

The Government must ensure that its effectiveness in anticipating, recognising and mitigating inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic is included in the terms of reference for the statutory public inquiry due to begin its work in 2022. (Paragraph 63).

Accept in part.

The public inquiry into the handling of the Coronavirus pandemic will be established on a statutory basis, with full powers under the Inquiries Act of 2005, and it will commence in the Spring. The scope and terms of reference are still being finalised. Further details will be announced in due course.

<p>The Equality Hub must be given a central role in the development and ongoing review of the National Risk Register, with the aim of ensuring equality issues are fully considered, at the earliest possible stage and based on robust data, in future emergency responses. (Paragraph 63).</p>	<p>Accept in part.</p> <p>During the ongoing review of the National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) we are looking to improve how the disproportionate impacts of risks on vulnerable people are considered. This will be reflected in the public facing National Risk Register (NRR) which is based on the NSRA. The Equality Hub has already been involved in the review so far and will continue to play a role.</p>
<p>Oversight and implementation of the UK's international equality commitments</p>	
<p>The new equalities strategy and annual Action Plans should set out actions to be taken to meet the UK's international equality commitments. Further, the Government should, as recommended by the UN and the Equality and Human Rights Commission, establish a National Mechanism for Implementation, Reporting and Follow-up, to ensure the most effective possible engagement with international equality and human rights conventions and treaties. Consideration should also be given to restructuring current processes, which are fragmented across several departments, and bringing oversight into a single international compliance team in the Equality Hub. (Paragraph 64).</p>	<p>Reject.</p> <p>The Equality Hub works effectively and collaboratively with other Government departments, such as the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, to meet the UK's international equality commitments and provide timely reporting to the various treaty committees.</p> <p>In the current format each department can provide their own policy expertise. Any monitoring mechanism would need to engage extensively with a wide range of departments to ensure that a comprehensive response is produced. The UK Government therefore already ensures adherence to our international obligations and that we meet the requirements of the treaty bodies.</p>
<p>A refreshed approach to stakeholder engagement and communications on sensitive issues</p>	
<p>We recommend the Government invite the Equality and Human Rights Commission to engage with a range of stakeholders to seek common ground on the most difficult balanced rights issues. The new equalities strategy should set out a programme of such stakeholder engagement on the most pressing issues, for example the interplay between options for GRA reform and women's rights to single-sex spaces, services and sports. It should also set out clear principles to underpin the choice of ministerial advisory panels and on which issues they should be appointed to advise. (Paragraph 65).</p>	<p>Reject.</p> <p>The EHRC wrote to the Committee on this matter. The Government echoes the EHRC's point that this is something the Commission takes into consideration through its day-to-day operation.</p>

The Equality Hub should conduct a review of the Government's communications on, and management of, sensitive and balanced rights issues, drawing in particular on lessons learned from the Gender Recognition Act reform process since 2018 and the Government's approach to communicating the findings of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities. (Paragraph 66).

Reject.

The Equality Hub interacts regularly with a wide range of stakeholders across equality issues, ensuring that it factors in all relevant views to its work.