

Written evidence: The role of the GEO: embedding equalities across Government

Submitted by Mary Buttolph

I am a retired librarian. I have spent my whole life working in public library services, mainly in inner city areas but also predominantly white working class communities. This has included much work with regard to equality and social inclusion to which I am passionately committed as well as working closely with local schools and community organisations of all sorts. I have developed policies and delivered training to library staff and to schools on Inset days.

• **The role of Minister for Women and Equalities: what does it mean for this to be a dual-departmental role?**

There are well rehearsed pros and cons around this issue. My view is that a siloed Women and Equalities Minister and department would lose more than it gains. It wouldn't increase continuity as any Minister of ability would inevitably be asked to take on other more prestigious posts. It is more than likely the post would go to a less experienced MP which would affect their credibility and ability to engage other Ministers as an equal.

Being a dual departmental role the Minister gains very valuable experience and sits at the Cabinet table. I see no benefit in adding to the upheavals of the recent past by making what will in reality be just another cosmetic change. With a new Minister and a new strategy it would be more beneficial to allow her to do her job and develop her plans.

• **How robustly does it champion equalities across Government?**

Equalities is not a niche issue but should be embedded through everything, it is a group responsibility not the sole responsibility of the Minister. The fact that there are systems like Equality Impact Assessments and the Public Authority Equality Duty together with Gender Pay Gap reporting indicates that this, although a work in progress, is having an impact on behaviour. I do however think there are issues with follow through in assessing the quality of these to ensure they are not just a tick box exercise. The current lobbying by trans groups over the GRA and interpretation of the Equality Act has exposed this faultline. Many public services have failed to carry out rigorous Impact Assessments before changing policies and practice at the behest of these organisations. This has resulted in individuals having to take legal action in the courts.

• **The GEO's role in highlighting the numerous equalities issues which have been exacerbated by the pandemic**

The GEO has a valuable function in this as in a crisis situation equality issues are not the first priority. Flagging issues early makes it possible to address and embed them in the rebuilding process rather than playing catch up years later. This is something the GEO should be perfectly placed to do.

• **The inquiry will also consider the new approaches and initiatives which Minister for Women and Equalities Liz Truss announced in her speech on fighting for fairness at the Centre for Policy Studies on Dec 16 2020, including the implications of the GEO taking on sponsorship of the Social Mobility Commission.**

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I fully support the approach that Liz Truss is taking. I believe in evidence-based policy making and that is dependent on robust objective data and rigorous research. I therefore welcome the Equality Hub. I also agree with her requirement for training etc to be evidence based. Too much training on equalities is shoddy and often counterproductive. We have seen for example training given to sex offenders which actually increased offending behaviour. Unconscious bias training is similarly flawed.

I share her concerns about the weight being given to the opinions of certain lobbying groups and the lack of challenge to their often shaky evidence. No individual organisation should be considered to speak on behalf of everyone in a specific group. Organisations which are having great influence on policy making have no democratic mandate for their activities. It is the responsibility of government to look past those who shout the loudest or are the most organised. Over the last few years, I have been shocked at the complicity of politicians in refusing to do that and actually shouting down and attempting to silence anyone who challenges or disagrees with these organisations, particularly over the Reform of the GRA.

I also support her view that the Equality Act is for everyone. The objective of equality is to ensure fairness and justice for all. Ignoring pressing social injustice because a person is placed in a particular category is neither equality or justice. The view from nowhere may be impossible but we should always attempt to stand in someone else's shoes. I will take pragmatism over purity any day of the week.

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