

Business in the Community response to the Women and Equalities Committee inquiry into the role of the GEO: embedding equalities across Government

The structure and function of the GEO and its location in the Cabinet Office: how effectively does this enable it to support cross-departmental work on equalities, including the collection and analysis of equalities data?

Settling the GEO in the Cabinet Office in 2018 was an improvement on its previous temporary locations¹. We are pleased that the government changed its mind on the GEO's location after this committee's inquiry into the GEO in 2017. As a central body, the Cabinet Office gives the GEO's work a higher profile and impact than it would otherwise have. We also hope that its location makes it easier for the GEO to collaborate with central government units working on related topics, like the Race Disparity Unit. Siloed working will be unacceptable as we try to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on those with protected characteristics.

The GEO's role in supporting compliance with international obligations including the UN Conventions and Sustainable Development Goals;

As the body accountable for increasing equality, the GEO should play its part in meeting the UK's international obligations. However, we believe it is being prevented from contributing to the Global Goals by the UK's government's structure.

There are only nine years until the 2030 deadline to meet the Global Goals. We know from our network that UK businesses are determined to deliver the Global Goals, but they need greater clarity from government. At present, the UK's approach to the Global Goals is too fractured and internationally focused. Responsibility for the Goals is held by a department with a non-domestic remit and, although global progress is important, change must begin at home. This issue was raised in the previous inquiry and we wrote to the International Development Committee when DFID and the FCO merged. On the Committee's recommendation, we wrote to the Prime Minister to suggest that the merger was the perfect time to move responsibility for the Global Goals to the Cabinet Office. We remain disappointed that this was not adopted.

Siloes are a serious risk to achieving the Global Goals; although all government departments are meant to engage with the UK's work on the Global Goals, this is not working. We accept the need

¹ [The role of Minister for Women and Equalities and the place of GEO in government](#), Women and Equalities Committee (2018)





for a strong, single point of leadership for the Global Goals. The Cabinet Office is best placed to fulfil this role: it can support both domestic and international progress on the Global Goals, which the FCDO cannot.

This realignment would break down siloes and make it easier for the GEO to understand and collaborate with other government projects to address inequality at home.

Recommendation: The Cabinet Office should take responsibility for the Global Goals

Recommendation: The GEO should recognise its role in achieving Global Goals 5 and 10.

The role of Minister for Women and Equalities: what does it mean for this to be a dual-departmental role? How robustly does it champion equalities across Government?

In answering this question, we have chosen two points to consider:

- Should the role be a dual-departmental one?
- Can one person be responsible for the issues of each group, especially as our understanding of equalities issues has increased significantly?

Currently, we have the worst of both worlds. The women and equalities brief is vast and warrants significant resource, but it is side-lined by minister's other role. We recommend that the Minister for Women and Equalities is made a standalone position at Cabinet level. This should be paired with increased funding, status for the GEO – and an expansion of its policy accountability beyond 'women, sexual orientation and transgender equality' to other areas of discrimination.

A single, Cabinet-level minister would be a strong voice for equality in central government. However, we would not want a blanket 'equalities' brief to inadvertently allow prioritisation of one area. Although the current Minister for Women and Equalities is currently supported by two Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State, the division of their roles into 'women' and 'equalities' has inevitably meant a focus on the former. We suggest that the addition of another junior minister and a more equal distribution of focus areas between the three ministers would lead to an intersectional, less biased approach.

Recommendation: The GEO's funding and policy oversight should be increased to boost its credibility.

Recommendation: The government should make the Minister for Women and Equalities a sole-departmental role at Cabinet level.





Recommendation: The government should add an additional junior minister role, with briefs spread equally.

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

We are extremely concerned about the pandemic's exacerbation of existing inequality. We set the effect of the pandemic on older workers in our factsheet [COVID-19: economic impact on age in the workplace](#). Our resources [Ethnicity and the Economic Impact of COVID-19](#) and [BAME Women, mental health and COVID-19](#) highlight the disproportionate impact on the physical health, livelihoods and mental health of ethnic minorities in the UK. A recent TUC report revealed that the number of BME workers in employment fell by 5.3% from Q3 2019 to Q3 2020, compared to just 0.2% for white workers². At the same time, black men and women in England and Wales are twice as likely to die as their white counterparts after contracting the virus³.

COVID-19 has also had a skewed impact on women, who are picking up the bulk of extra childcare duties, more likely to be furloughed and have experienced a sharp rise in domestic abuse⁴. The decision to suspend gender pay gap reporting in 2020 was understandable, but regrettable. We are concerned that the Minister did not guarantee it would be reinstated for 2021 at departmental questions on 10 February⁵. Pay gap reporting has played a powerful role in shining a light on ongoing pay inequality. The importance of maintaining this was evidenced by the drop in reporting rates in absence of the requirement⁶. We believe this should be brought back with an expanded remit, including a requirement that companies provide narratives and time-bound action plans.

Although the GEO has engaged with the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 (we look forward to the overdue publication of the second quarterly report on the progress to address COVID-19 health inequalities), it and the Minister for Women and Equalities have not been a strong enough voice on the topic. We remain convinced that this will not change until political accountability for the GEO is more than an afterthought. Recommendations made elsewhere in this response would facilitate the GEO having an increased presence to tackle equalities issues.

² [Jobs and recovery monitor - BME workers](#), TUC (2021)

³ Coronavirus (COVID-19) related deaths by ethnic group, England and Wales, ONS (2020)

⁴ [Five ways employers can champion gender equality right now](#), BITC (2021)

⁵ [Women and Equalities – oral answers to questions](#), Hansard (2021)

⁶ [Half of businesses choose not to report 2019-2020 gender pay gap](#), BITC (2020)





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.

The Minister's December speech criticising "fashionable" causes dismissed very real inequalities in the UK and suggested these are now less important, or even imagined. There is still a lack of representation of non-white leaders at senior levels. BITC's 2020 Race at the Top revisited report found that less than 1% of senior journalists and only 1% of academics are black⁷. This has a direct link to a lack of access to opportunity among those from black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds. Impacts range from educational and health outcomes to employment prospects and access to funding for entrepreneurs; 48% of ethnic minority business owners do not plan to access or expect to qualify for any government support schemes in the UK⁸.

We welcome the GEO's sponsorship of the Social Mobility Commission and a new focus on geographical and social inequalities. As our Place work⁹ would demonstrate, we understand that left-behind areas in the UK face additional barriers, but this new emphasis should not come at the expense of other work on inequality. An example of the potential pitfalls, the Chancellor's pledge to relocate 22,000 civil service jobs outside of London¹⁰ could have a disproportionate impact on ethnic minorities - 26% of ethnic minority civil servants live in London. The GEO must ensure thorough equality impact assessments are conducted to not disproportionately impact any ethnic groups.

Disparities across ethnicities exist even when accounting for location and socioeconomic deprivation. In all regions of England and Scotland, unemployment rates are lower for white people than for all other ethnic groups combined. "Fashionable" inequalities and levelling-up are not mutually exclusive: they are interactive and multiplicative. On the evidence of the Minister's speech on the 16 December 2020, we remain concerned that the GEO has not adopted this principle.

Recommendation: The Minister should make a public statement reaffirming the GEO's commitment to tackling racial and gender inequalities as well as social/geographical inequalities.

⁷ [Black Voices Report](#), BITC (2020)

⁸ [Impact of Covid-19 on Black and Ethnic Minority-led businesses](#), Extend Ventures (2020)

⁹ [Place](#), BITC

¹⁰ [Budget Speech 2020](#), HM Treasury (2020)





Recommendation: Given its new remit over the Social Mobility Commission, the GEO should ensure that the compounding impact of protected characteristics like race is included in the Commission's work on social mobility.

About BITC

BITC is the oldest and largest business-led membership organisation dedicated to responsible business. We work to inspire and engage businesses to become more responsible and tackle some of society's biggest issues:

- Developing a skilled and inclusive workforce for today and tomorrow
- Building thriving communities where people want to live and work
- Innovating to sustain and repair our planet.

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