

Written evidence submitted by Stonewall [GEO0046]

Introduction

1. Stonewall welcomes the opportunity to respond to this inquiry. The Government Equalities Office has a pivotal role to play to address inequality and tackle discrimination and has a crucial responsibility to champion the needs of LGBTQ+ communities in government.
2. Stonewall is Europe's largest organisation campaigning for LGBTQ+ equality. Stonewall conducts and commissions original and innovative research into LGBTQ+ people's needs and experiences. We work closely with civil society, employers, service providers, schools & colleges, and government to ensure that all LGBTQ+ people are free to be themselves.

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

3. This Committee's 2018 report into [The role of Minister for Women and Equalities and the place of GEO in government](#) highlights the key challenges that face the Government Equalities Office: the GEO has been "unusually itinerant"; its role as the "engine of equality across all policy areas and protected characteristics" is unclear; and its cross-departmental influence is uncertain.
4. Stonewall believes these challenges still hamper the efficacy of the GEO and have been exacerbated by the reduction of GEO's programmatic funding.
5. The current equalities structure, in which inequalities are split out across different departments and workstreams and the GEO is primarily responsible for policy areas impacting women and LGBT+ people, clearly fails to account for the complexity and interdependency of inequalities.
6. As highlighted by this Committee, equality goals would be best served by an integrated pan-equalities department, with a clear and robust co-ordinating role across Government departments. This would, in the short term, serve COVID recovery efforts, and enable the development of a long-term, formal, cross-government, pan-equality strategy.
7. Whether it is in the Cabinet Office or elsewhere, the GEO remains the obvious central repository of research expertise to inform the work of other departments. For instance, the [National LGBT Survey \(2018\)](#) has been an indispensable resource for researchers, civil society, funders, and policy makers to understand the needs of LGBT people. Stonewall hopes that other projects, such as the [Variations in Sex Characteristics Call for Evidence](#) and the research into the [experiences of those who have undergone Conversion Therapy](#) can also be made public to serve similar goals.
8. An integrated department, with insight and access across Government departments, would be well placed to incubate effective interventions with short-term seed funding that could be transferred to larger departments once their impact has been tested. The recent [GEO funded anti-homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic \(HBT\) bullying training programmes](#) are an excellent example of an inexpensive initiative with significant positive outcomes that could easily be replicated more widely once transferred from the GEO to the Department for Education and supported with renewed long-term funding.

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

9. The GEO has a crucial role to play in supporting the UK's international obligations, including a specific [departmental commitment](#) to “reduce disadvantage, improve equality and tackle discrimination through the work of the Race Disparity Unit and the Government Equalities Office”, in line with Sustainable Development Goals 5, 10, 16.
10. The GEO's [LGBT Action Plan \(2018\)](#) has met some of its stated objectives (including the appointment of a National LGBT Health Advisor and the publication of inclusive RSHE guidance). However, many objectives have not been reached almost 1000 days since the publication of the plan and in some areas the situation has actively worsened, most notably regarding [GRA reform](#), [waiting lists](#) for gender identity services, and rates of reported [homophobic and transphobic hate crime](#).
11. In addition, the promised update to the LGBT Action Plan is now a year overdue, the LGBT Advisory Panel has [suffered multiple recent resignations](#), and there is no successor advisory body in place despite current appointments expiring at the end of March. This will leave this Government without a formal LGBT advisory structure with which to support their international obligations.
12. This is set against a wider international human rights picture – summarised in [ILGA-Europe's 2021 country report](#) – in which the worsening environment for trans people in the UK, and our failure to deliver legislative reform of the GRA, has been cited as a reason for the UK's rapidly worsening position in [ILGA-Europe's annual Rainbow Map](#) rankings, and where progress has been cited as a key requirement for the UK to improve its position in the [OECD LGBTI inclusion framework](#).
13. Stonewall would like to highlight the importance of robust, consistent, and detailed identities monitoring – including monitoring sexual orientation and gender – to support our international obligations and to deliver on the commitments made in the [LGBT Action Plan](#).
14. The [2019 UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women](#) concluding observations which include a number of recommendations to strengthen the GEO, including a recommendation to:
“Systematically collect and publish data, disaggregated by sex, gender, ethnicity, disability and age, throughout the whole of its territory to inform policymaking and assess the impact of measures taken.” (26.d)
15. In the [LGBT Action Plan](#), this Government committed to ‘ending conversion therapy against LGBT people’. In July 2020, the Prime Minister [stated](#) his intention to ‘ban’ what he called “these abhorrent practices”, and the Minister for Women and Equalities later [stated](#) that the Government would shortly bring forward plans to ban so-called ‘conversion therapy’.
16. In June 2020, the UN Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity called for [a global ban on conversion therapy](#), stating that
“such practices constitute an egregious violation of rights to bodily autonomy, health, and free expression of one’s sexual orientation and gender identity. Ultimately, when conducted forcibly, they also represent a breach to the prohibition of torture and ill-treatment”.
Stonewall hopes that the UK Government will shortly bring forward plans for a full legislative ban on conversion therapy, in line with the UN Independent Expert's recommendations.

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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?

17. The role of Minister for Women and Equalities is a vital and complex role with a wide-ranging and challenging brief. As this Committee highlights in [their last report](#) on the role, there has been a high level of turnover among post-holders and the role has always been held in addition to a full-time job as a Secretary of State.
18. Stonewall concurs with the conclusions drawn by this Committee that the role would be served by both long-term stability in the post-holder, and sufficient support from dedicated junior ministers.
19. Furthermore, we note the concerns raised that:

“There is, however, no getting away from the fact that the way the job is allocated makes the role look like an afterthought, and that any postholder with a demanding ‘day job’ will understandably struggle to give it the attention it needs... This constraint on capacity may be preventing the role fulfilling its potential as an effective cross-Whitehall watchdog on equalities.”
20. Given the complexity of the issues at stake, and the importance of the role in ensuring that equalities are given the profile they deserve across Government departments, Stonewall supports the recommendation that the Minister for Women & Equalities should become a standalone post.
21. If Britain is to maintain its reputation as a global leader in promoting equalities, then we must ensure that our equalities bodies have the resources and leadership they need to further equalities both at home and abroad. While we acknowledge the benefits of the post being held by the Secretary of State for International Trade, we believe that a standalone ministership with strong ties to the FCDO would better serve our international equalities priorities.

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

22. As noted in [Stonewall’s joint sector response](#) to the Committee’s earlier inquiry into the impact of the pandemic, the Government response to the COVID-19 crisis must take into account the needs of those with protected characteristics, including LGBTQ+ people, so that the pandemic does not exacerbate the stark inequalities already faced by these communities.
23. Stonewall welcomes the [Minister of Equalities’ investment](#) in understanding the impact of COVID-19 on Black people and people of colour, and in improving messaging to those communities. It is crucial that equivalent funding is provided to support LGBTQ+ communities (including addressing the specific needs of those with intersecting identities) recover from the COVID-19 crisis.
24. Stonewall is working in partnership with NatCen, Consortium, LGBT Foundation, and Intercom Trust on [an UKRI funded project](#) to assess the COVID-19 pandemic’s ongoing impact on UK LGBTQ+ communities, and how the LGBTQ+ voluntary and community sectors can be best supported to respond. We look forward to sharing our findings with the GEO to inform strategic initiatives to support our communities’ recovery from the pandemic.

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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.

25. Stonewall welcomes the Minister's commitment to address inequality and discrimination, and the Equality Hub's equality data project. We hope it will create an invaluable central repository of research into the diversity of experiences of marginalised communities and their intersecting needs.
26. We hope that the collation of this data will not be an endpoint but will prompt further Government investment and data-informed initiatives to improve the lives of people in the UK, in partnership with the civil society and community groups who are experts in the needs of their stakeholders.
27. However, Stonewall rejects the suggestion made in the December 16th speech that 'lived experience' is in conflict with 'evidence and data'. Data is meaningless without the human understanding and expertise that interprets it, and the everyday experiences of those who experience discrimination are clarified and amplified by research that puts their lives into context.
28. To dismiss the 'loud voices' that campaign is to put minoritised communities in an impossible bind: their experiences cannot stand for themselves, but those who amass evidence and advocate on their behalf must be disregarded precisely because they are making themselves heard.
29. Stonewall believes that everyone deserves a champion, and that it is the responsibility of campaigning organisations to ensure that the voices of the most vulnerable are heard.
30. We also reject the accusation that those who advocate for a particular community fail to recognise an individual's needs. The inequalities an individual experiences are entangled with their personal history – but communities have distinct and shared needs that are not served by denying their specificity. If we are to address the 'scourge' of socioeconomic and geographic inequality, we cannot tackle these harms without understanding their relationship with race, religion, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity and age.
31. We are deeply concerned by an approach that considers certain marginalised identities to be 'fashionable' (such as race or LGBT status), dismisses attention to the needs of these communities as virtue signalling, and thereby attempts to pit identities against one another. Stonewall believes that none of us are free until we are all free.
32. Stonewall hopes that the Equality Hub and Social Mobility Commission's recommendations will recognise both the complexity of individual experiences and the wealth of data that supports a systemic view of inequalities.

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