

## Written evidence submitted by Equally Ours [GEO0047]

### 1. Who we are

1.1. Equally Ours (formerly the Equality and Diversity Forum) is the national network of organisations committed to making a reality of equality and human rights in people's lives. Our members include Age UK, Mind, Stonewall, the TUC, the Runnymede Trust, Child Poverty Action Group, the Traveller Movement, the Fawcett Society, Inclusion London, Disability Rights UK and the Gender Identity Research and Education Society (GIRES). Further information about our work and a full list of our members and associates is available at [www.equallyours.org.uk](http://www.equallyours.org.uk)

1.2. Many of our members provide vital front-line services and advocacy for and with people who experience discrimination and inequality and their wider social and economic impacts in relation to their protected characteristics or human rights. This evidence is informed by Equally Ours' and our members' knowledge of the issues and problems that people and communities are facing, as well as our experience of engaging and working with the Government Equalities Office (GEO).

1.3. Equally Ours formed in 2002. Initially known as the Equality and Diversity Forum, we brought together leading equality and human rights organisations to work together to level up and improve legal protections under the Equality Acts 2006 and 2010. We have had a relationship with the Government Equalities Office (GEO) and its predecessors from the outset and they have Observer status within our network. This has been a constructive relationship that has enabled us to focus on collaboration and solutions while being a critical friend to successive governments where needed.

1.4. The machinery of government changes that have led to the creation of the Equality Hub in the Cabinet Office, including the forthcoming move of sponsorship of the Social Mobility Commission, have significant potential to improve government action on equality across the Government. Reaching that potential will require political leadership combined with practical action.

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### Recommendations:

1. The Government Equalities Office and the Minister for Women and Equality need to be at the heart of driving Government use of equality and human rights to underpin all measures to respond to the virus and rebuild the UK in the long term. The GEO needs to be enabled and tasked to support major government policy initiatives, such as the building back better through investment in social and capital infrastructure, to proactively advance equality and address and reduce discrimination and inequality. The focus should be on harnessing these major policy agendas to achieve a step-change in equality, not just mitigate negative impacts.
2. Covid-19 brought into sharp focus how people and communities who are already experiencing discrimination and inequality are disproportionately impacted in emergencies. Learning from the pandemic needs to ensure that future emergency preparedness and contingency planning builds in analysis and action to ensure all communities needs and rights are met in emergencies. The GEO and Equality Hub should be fully engaged in all lessons learned exercises, contingency planning and the development of the next National Risk Register.
3. There is therefore a strong argument for the role of Minister for Women and Equalities to be formalised as a standalone, Cabinet-level position. Whatever the structure chosen, the post holder must have a reasonable budget, a published departmental plan setting out specific priorities and performance measures and be a strong champion for equality across government.
4. Alongside the previous recommendations, the GEO should develop a cross-government equality strategy, developed in partnership with civil society and based on the data that we expect the new equality data programme to produce. It should cover strategic policy areas with significant impact where a pan-equality approach is needed, as noted before, such as public spending. The Government should use specific equality objectives, set under the public sector equality duty, to ensure a statutory footing for action and accountability.
5. The Equality Unit should also use the data from the new programme to support collaboration with civil society on cross-government work on the issues affecting specific groups, including those facing poverty and socio-economic disadvantage. This could take the form of an action plan, as seen in previous work on LGBT equality, or a dedicated strategy as called for by race equality and Deaf and disabled people's organisations.

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6. The GEO should publish information on the methodology it is using for the equality data programme and engage with civil society, including Equally Ours and our Research Network, to identify and fill gaps in the existing evidence base. This should specifically address how data is being gathered and analysed intersectionally.
7. Many of our members have expressed unease about the Minister for Women and Equalities' recent characterisation of aspects of equality as 'fashionable' issues and are concerned that this could have the impact of being divisive and of not correctly identifying where the problems lie, which in turn could lead to the unintended consequence of ineffective solutions. We invite the Committee to ask the Minister for Women and Equalities to clarify the approach the Government will take to ensure policy approaches in these areas are not divisive and are evidence-based.

### Introduction

1.5. Our Chief Executive Ali Harris gave evidence to the Committee on the role of the Minister for Women and Equalities and the place of the GEO in government in May 2018. Since then, there has been both a change of Government and a change of Minister, and the GEO has been given a permanent home in the Cabinet Office.

1.6. Covid-19 has drawn attention to deep-seated inequalities in the UK today, particularly affecting Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities, women, Deaf and disabled people, those on low or no incomes, older and LGBT+ people. It has also shown us just how important our shared humanity is, and that we have a responsibility to rebuild a society that works for everyone.

1.7. Our polling shows that the public think equality and human rights are vital to creating a more compassionate, resilient and just UK. And that the public want the Government to do more to tackle inequality, advance equality and strengthen human rights in practice.<sup>1</sup>

1.8. The Government Equalities Office and the Minister for Women and Equalities need to be at the heart of driving Government use of equality and human rights to underpin all measures to respond to the virus and rebuild the UK.

1.9. We therefore welcome this timely inquiry.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.equallyours.org.uk/resources/the-equality-and-human-rights-impacts-of-covid-19/>

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### **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?*

1.10. Equally Ours fully supports the decision to give the Government Equalities Office a permanent home in the Cabinet Office. As the Committee's 2018 report noted, this is not just a matter of theoretical or bureaucratic interest to Whitehall insiders and people who follow politics - the structures and leadership that the Government puts in place to tackle the inequalities that affect people's daily lives throughout the country matter.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Structure & location*

1.11. Since the GEO's move into the Cabinet Office the Government announced the creation of an 'Equality Hub', bringing together the GEO, the Race Disparity Unit and the Disability Unit (formerly the Office for Disability Issues, located in the Department for Work and Pensions). Sponsorship of the Social Mobility Commission is also due to be moved to the Government Equalities Office.

1.12. These decisions have significant potential benefits. It should allow for greater coordination and a stronger champion for equality across government, a simpler point of contact for civil society and more coherent actions across and beyond different protected characteristics. The Minister for Women and Equality has stated that she expects the move of the Social Mobility Commission to "give real teeth" to the ability of government to act on inequalities associated with socio-economic status and geography.<sup>3</sup>

1.13. While this provides a welcome widening of the remit of the Equality Hub, gaps remain in respect of age discrimination, where work still sits in the Department for Work and Pensions and is limited to older workers.<sup>4</sup>

1.14. The Equality Hub was also created at a time of significant political turmoil around the last general election, with patchy external communication leading to confusion in civil society on who was doing what and where. This time was also characterised by poor engagement with civil society by government in general. While there have been notable improvements over the period of the pandemic – we again have regular contact with the GEO and the Civil Society and Youth Directorate in the Department for Culture Media and Sport<sup>5</sup>, our members continue to report

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<sup>2</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/356/356.pdf> at para.4.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/fight-for-fairness>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/help-and-support-for-older-workers/help-and-support-for-older-workers#the-business-champion-for-older-workers>

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difficulties and we believe there is a need for a more systematic and structured approach to engagement. This should involve a combination of engagement at the pan-equality level where there are issues of common concern across communities, as well as engagement that is specific to different areas of equality.

1.15. Two examples illustrate the problems that have been experienced:

- Development of a Disability Strategy. Disabled people's organisations have reported problems with the consultation to date, including an apparent failure to use existing structures to engage with disabled people, lack of clarity on what was being consulted on and use of an online questionnaire that was not fully accessible and did not ask about priorities for the strategy itself. There is a fear that this will lead to a strategy that is grounded in the priorities of the Government rather than disabled people's lived experience.
- The response to the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on BAME people, where the Government has been slow to act and has not acknowledged the structural inequalities that underpin this disproportionate impact. The Government has commissioned some welcome work to explore the evidence of disparate impacts but has not acted on the recommendations of many past reports which the JCHR rightly concludes has intensified "disaffection and lack of confidence in the Government on race issues."<sup>6</sup>

1.16. It also remains to be seen how the different parts of the Hub will work together – both across government and in building stronger relationships with civil society. The recent announcement that the Social Mobility Commission will join the hub has great potential for building a coherent strategy that can tackle poverty at its intersection with inequalities connected to sex, race, religion or belief, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, age and beyond.

### *Function*

1.17. The most significant shift in function is the expansion of the Equality Unit to encompass socio-economic inequality. We have long supported a greater focus on the way that social and economic inequalities interact with people's sex, race, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity and other bases on which people experience discrimination and disadvantage. Most recently, we held a seminar on intersectionality that emphasised the importance of intersections such as race and class, sex and poverty etc. We also support the campaign of our member organisations Just Fair and The Equality Trust for the commencement of the socio-economic duty in s.1 of the Equality Act 2010 in England.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Formerly the Office for Civil Society (OCS)

<sup>6</sup> <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/3376/documents/32359/default/> para 35

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1.18. Covid-19 brought into sharp focus how people and communities who are already experiencing discrimination and inequality are disproportionately impacted in emergencies. Learning from the pandemic needs to ensure that future emergency preparedness and contingency planning builds in analysis and action to ensure all communities needs and rights are met in emergencies. The GEO and Equality Hub should be fully engaged in both lessons learned exercises, contingency planning and the development of the next National Risk Register.

### *Equality data*

1.19. The announcement that the GEO will take forward a new equality data programme that will collect data across all protected characteristics, plus geographic and other social and economic indicators is welcome. We expect this to make a considerable contribution to understanding how these factors interact and expanding our understanding of inequality connected to socio-economic status. The welcome inclusion in the current National Census of questions relating to sexual orientation and gender identity will also generate potentially valuable new data.

1.20. The race disparity audit was an excellent example of this type of work and provides a model for the new project – including the successes that the initial audit had with engaging civil society. Given the challenges faced by the race disparity unit in collecting data on ethnicity,<sup>8</sup> we are concerned that the new equality data programme may face significant gaps in the data. The GEO should publish its methodology and follow the model of extensive engagement that characterised the work of the race disparity unit on the Audit.

1.21. Further, as the Committee identified in its 2018 report into the race disparity audit, “Clear and measurable plans are needed for [...] turning [the data] into a set of cross-government priorities for action to reduce the disparities”.<sup>9</sup> We would like to see a commitment to a cross government equality strategy developed in partnership with civil society and based on the data that we expect the new equality data programme to produce.

1.22. This strategy should cover strategic policy areas with significant impact where a pan-equality approach is needed, such as public spending. The Government should use specific equality objectives, set under the public sector equality duty, to ensure a statutory footing for action and accountability.

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<sup>7</sup> The duty has already been commenced in Scotland and Wales. The Equality Act does not apply to Northern Ireland.

<sup>8</sup> For example, disaggregation in some data sets was limited to ‘white or non-white’.

<sup>9</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmwomeq/562/562.pdf>

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1.23. The equality data programme and the new census questions on sexual orientation and gender identity also provide the opportunity to support collaboration with civil society on cross-government work on the issues affecting specific groups, including women, older people, children and young people, LGBT+ people and those facing poverty and socio-economic disadvantage. The precise model would depend on the issues and priorities of those affected, but could take the form of an action plan, as seen in earlier work on LGBT equality, or a dedicated strategy.

1.24. At Equally Ours we have long argued in favour of a dedicated race equality strategy. The pandemic has shown just how important this is, and we believe that a race equality strategy should be developed as a matter of urgency, involving race equality organisations and wider civil society organisations and networks working on intersectional race issues, and using the already extensive evidence base to move from research to action.

1.25. The Government is also due to launch a Disability Strategy. Our members are concerned that current engagement is insufficient, and further work is needed to ensure that the strategy is co-produced with disabled people and their organisations, and wider civil society organisations working on intersectional disability issues, to ensure a strategy that results in a truly inclusive society.

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

1.26. The role of Minister for Women and Equalities is central to government commitment to equality, providing leadership both within and outside of government. It is also welcome that the Secretary of State is supported by two junior Ministers. Without this leadership the work of the GEO and the Equality Hub more generally will have limited impact, regardless of the robustness of its evidence base.

1.27. The dual nature of the role is one factor in limiting this, as is the disjointed nature of leadership on equality within Government.

1.28. As noted, the role of Minister for Women and Equalities is an additional responsibility to a substantive Secretary of State position. It also remains in a different department to the Government Equalities Office, for which it is responsible. There is a separate Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, located in the Department for Work and Pensions and supported by the Disability Unit – now located in the Cabinet Office. The Race Disparity Unit began life in the Cabinet Office and remains there – but its current work is being overseen by the Minister for Equalities, whose primary role is in the Treasury. It is not yet clear how Ministerial

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responsibility for the Social Mobility Commission will be managed once it becomes part of the Equality Hub.

1.29. This disjointed leadership, combined with the lack of a coherent pan-equality strategy for advancing equality across government, has led to a loss of focus that has impacted on the ability of the Government to act when serious problems have emerged – including the lack of recognition of the equality issues that emerged very early on in the pandemic.

1.30. Our first priority for the role of Minister for Women and Equalities is that it is delivered robustly and treated as an important role within government, with strong visibility, commitment and a willingness to engage with civil society. The view of our members reported by our Chief Executive in 2018 has not changed: the commitment of the Minister is a major priority, in that it helps to drive results, but it does not have to be 'either/or'. We should be looking for Ministers to have the commitment *and* urge the Government to put in place the structures to support them.<sup>10</sup>

1.31. There is a strong argument for the role to be formalised as a standalone, Cabinet-level position. Whatever the structure chosen, the post holder must have a reasonable budget, a published departmental plan setting out specific priorities and performance measures and be a strong champion for equality across government.

### **How robustly does it [The role of Minister for Women and Equalities] champion equalities across Government?**

1.32. We do not feel that the role is currently operating as a strong champion for equality across government. This may be due to the dual nature of the role: International Trade is a significant policy area, particularly following Brexit. Whatever the reason, it has led to feedback from our members that they feel action on equality has been lacking priority in government.

1.33. This was highlighted by the evidence of the Minister to the Committee in April 2020 that GEO staff had been redeployed to other duties<sup>11</sup> at precisely the time when early action on the equality issues emerging from the pandemic and the Government's response to it needed robust attention. While it subsequently emerged that GEO officials were also working with other Government departments to assist their response to the equality issues arising from the pandemic, it was an example of how the Government appeared slow to grasp the extent of the unequal impact of the pandemic.

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<sup>10</sup> Q 96

<sup>11</sup> Q63 <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/297/pdf/>



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1.34. Around the same time the Government paused gender pay gap reporting for the year<sup>12</sup> and initially refused to publish the equality impact assessment of the Coronavirus Act. When the impact assessment was published, it was limited to the Act itself and did not address the wider government strategy on responding to the pandemic.

1.35. We appreciate that much of the work the Minister and the GEO do is not public, and that much can be achieved through constructive discussions between the GEO and other government departments. But transparency and visibility is an important part of leadership and accountability, and we have seen only one significant speech by the current post-holder in the past year despite the inequalities exposed by the pandemic.

1.36. Government briefings on the pandemic are still frequently missing a British Sign Language interpreter<sup>13</sup> – provision that would have both practical and symbolic impact on inclusion for Deaf and disabled people. Most recently, the Minister and the GEO appear to have been absent from discussions on tackling violence against women and girls – an area where a cross-government and pan-equality perspective is vital.

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

1.37. Despite what appeared to be a slow start, as discussed above, the Government Equalities Office has been an important route for Equally Ours to raise equality issues with government during the pandemic. We have re-established regular and productive dialogue with officials, who have also assisted us in reaching out to other parts of the Equality Unit and officials within other government departments.

1.38. The pandemic response epitomises the type of cross-government challenge that the GEO, as a central source of expertise with a cross-government perspective, is well placed to work on. We would like to see that role strengthened, with equality expertise given greater prominence in strategic decision making. The Minister has characterised the role of the GEO as being a 'hub and spoke unit', gathering data and working with individual departments who remain responsible for their own policies. It seems likely that this approach has contributed to the lack of sufficient

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/employers-do-not-have-to-report-gender-pay-gaps>

<sup>13</sup> An interpreter is provided when Covid-19 briefings by the Prime Minister are broadcast on the BBC News Channel and on iPlayer.

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thought given to equality issues in the overall approach taken by the Government to the pandemic.

1.39. For example, the vaccination programme was initially designed without consideration of barriers to take up among BAME and faith communities.<sup>14</sup> Following intervention by numerous parties including Equally Ours and our members, action is now being taken to mitigate this, but the UK Government had a duty to do this from the outset under national<sup>15</sup> and international law<sup>16</sup>. As identified above, there is still no BSL interpreter at most live government briefings on the pandemic, and Deaf and disabled people's organisations are having to advocate for accessible information rather than it being built in from the start.

1.40. The Committee's report into the gendered economic impact of the pandemic recognised the way in which the gendered inequalities in the economy have been ignored, and sometimes exacerbated, by the pandemic response. We agree and remain concerned that the lack of understanding of how such inequalities operate in practice means that the recovery will face the same problems. For example, our member the Women's Budget Group have reported concerns about two comments from Ministers, cited in the Committee's report, that suggest a lack of understanding of structural inequality: the Minister for Equalities appeared not to understand that if Treasury investment decisions are targeted at male dominated industries this will disproportionately disadvantage women workers, and appeared unaware of evidence that 70% of workers unable to claim statutory sick pay are women.<sup>17</sup> Had the Minister and Treasury officials explicitly used equality data in policy development this could have been avoided.

1.41. Equally Ours and our members have raised numerous other issues that relate to older people, women, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller, LGBT+ communities and others, and the Committee will hear many other examples from different perspectives. But overall, our concern is with the UK Government's approach of mitigating problems when they become apparent rather than proactively considering the barriers facing people experiencing disadvantage and embedding policy solutions and action to remove the barriers and advance equality.

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/projects-and-publications/employment-3/overexposed-and-underprotected-covid-19s-impact-on-bme-communities.html>

<sup>15</sup> Primarily the public sector equality duty, but also the duty to anticipate reasonable adjustments in the goods and services provisions of the Equality Act 2010.

<sup>16</sup> The International Convention on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (Article 2, Article 12, and Article 15), also see CESCR General Comment No.25.

<sup>17</sup> <https://wbg.org.uk/media/womens-budget-group-response-to-the-women-and-equalities-select-committee-report-coronavirus-and-the-gendered-economic-impact/>

**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.**

1.42. The speech by the Minister for Women and Equalities in December 2020 contained many commitments that Equally Ours welcomes. As explained above, we believe that the new equality data programme has potential to form the basis of significant government action on equality and welcome the fact that this can encompass socio-economic disadvantage.

1.43. Many of our members have, however expressed unease about the way in which this shift in focus for the GEO has been portrayed – we are particularly worried that the characterisation of aspects of equality as ‘fashionable’ issues has been divisive and does not correctly identify where the problems lie. Some of our members have also expressed concern over recent developments such as the appointment of David Goodhart to the Board of the Equality and Human Rights Commission<sup>18</sup> and the recent resignation of three members of the Government’s LGBT advisory panel.<sup>19</sup>

1.44. Such developments could have the unintended consequence of encouraging the type of evidence-free judgements that the Minister rightly stated in her December 2020 speech she wants to avoid. We do not want to see the welcome broadening out of the remit of the Equality Unit undermined by this risk and would welcome public clarification of the approach the Government will take.

**March 2021**

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<sup>18</sup> Equally Ours Letter to Elizabeth Truss 26 Nov 2020: <https://www.equallyours.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Equally-Ours-Letter-to-Elizabeth-Truss-26Nov2020.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> <https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/government-uk-lgbt-advisers-protest-ministers-inequality-liz-truss-kemi-badenoch-908852>

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### **Signed by:**

#### **Members**

Age UK  
brap  
British Institute of Human Rights  
Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE)  
Citizens Advice  
Disability Rights UK  
Discrimination Law Association  
End Violence Against Women Campaign  
Equality Trust  
Fair Play South West  
Fawcett Society  
Friends, Families and Travellers  
Gender Identity Research and Education Society (GIRES)  
Humanists UK  
Law Centres Network  
Maternity Action  
Mind  
National AIDS Trust  
National Alliance of Women's Organisations (NAWO)  
Press for Change  
Race on the Agenda (ROTA)  
Royal National Institute of Blind People  
Royal National Institute for Deaf People  
Runnymede Trust  
Security Women  
Sign Health  
Scope  
Stonewall  
Trades Union Congress (TUC)  
Traveller Movement  
UKREN (UK Race in Europe Network)  
UNISON  
Women's Budget Group  
Women's Resource Centre

#### **Associates**

Business Disability Forum  
EqualiTeach  
Just Fair