

Areas covered by the Inquiry

- 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?
- The GEO's role in supporting compliance with international obligations including the UN Conventions and Sustainable Development Goals;
- 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?
- The GEO's role in highlighting the numerous equalities issues which have been exacerbated by the pandemic;

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 structure and function of the Government Equalities Office

- Since April 2019 the Government Equalities Office (GEO) has been situated within the Cabinet Office.¹ Prior to this, since at least May 2010, the office and its staff had been attached to whichever line department the minister for women and equalities was leading. The office has moved at five times in this period: from the Home Office, to the (then) Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS), to the Department for Education (DfE), back to the Home Office to the (then) Department for International Development (DfID) before finally moving to its current place in the Cabinet Office.
- The GEO currently has around 100 staff (FTE), organised as a single directorate within the Cabinet Office.²
- Before moving to the Cabinet Office the GEO faced a range of practical challenges. Constant relocation of staff within Whitehall resulted in many prosaic practical issues: difficulty accessing new IT systems and offices, regular disruption to working practices and the challenge of adapting to new environments and departmental cultures. Nicky Morgan described the move from DCMS to DfE as “quite tricky and quite traumatic”.³ IFG work has found that departmental restructures are costly and time-consuming for the ministers and officials involved, distracting them from their day jobs.⁴
- The supposed benefit was that GEO officials would be co-located with the minister for women and equalities and so have better access to decision makers. However, in our view this benefit did not outweigh the transition costs imposed by repeated moves at the time. That would be especially so now where remote working is the norm and most interaction between officials and ministers is done virtually.
- Bringing the GEO in-house within the Cabinet Office brought it closer to other teams with related interests, such as the Race Disparity Unit and the Disability Unit.⁵ It is also closer to teams with the ability to make real changes in relevant areas within Government, such as Civil Service HR.
- The GEO has seven priorities. Most of these relate to the policy areas of other departments. Being in the Cabinet Office enhances its ability to work with those departments on these issues across government:
 - The Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) on equal representation in the workplace and on boards of directors, and reducing the gender pay gap
 - The Department for Education on eliminating bullying on the basis of sexual orientation in schools
 - The Home Office on reducing violence against women and girls
 - The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) on “promoting the rights of British citizens abroad and using our influence to promote international equality”
- Being located in the Cabinet Office, alongside other units with similar aims, means that the GEO is more likely to be effective. It benefits from the intangible authority that comes from speaking from the centre of government. Rather than being seen as a subsidiary component of a line department it represents a central function of the government's wider, cross-cutting work.

The GEO's role supporting compliance with international obligations

- We have no views on this question

The role of the Minister for Women and Equalities

- Since 2010 eight people have served as the minister for women and equalities. These individuals have held this role alongside their main role as a secretary of state. The role was briefly split into two between April and July 2014. Sajid

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Javid held the role of minister for equalities (as well as being secretary of state for culture, media and sport), and Nicky Morgan was appointed minister for women (as well as being financial secretary to the treasury).^{6,7}

- Liz Truss is the current minister for women and equalities. She is supported by Baroness Berridge of the Vale of Catmose, the parliamentary under-secretary of state for women, and Kemi Badenoch, the parliamentary under-secretary of state for equalities. All three roles are dual roles: Liz Truss is also secretary of state for international trade, Baroness Berridge is also parliamentary under-secretary of state for the school system, and Kemi Badenoch is also exchequer secretary to the treasury.
- The role of minister for women and equalities has seen a high level of churn relative to other ministerial positions. Eight people holding the role since 2010 is more than any cabinet-level position other than the minister for culture, media and sport, which has had nine different secretaries of state since 2010.
- Ministerial churn is an inevitable consequence of how the UK's executive branch of government is structured. However excess churn is problematic. It makes it harder for ministers to be effective in post as there is always a learning curve and period of adjustment with any new role. It also hampers department's ability to deliver consistent policies and make progress on issues that require long-term reforms.⁸
- The role of minister for women and equalities is no exception. As the minor component in a dual-role it may be more vulnerable to churn. The role has typically changed as part of a reshuffle, however the person handing the role over has not always left the cabinet at the same time, so the reasons why the role moved are not always clear:
 - Theresa May assumed the role at the start of the coalition government alongside her post as home secretary. But the job was passed to Maria Miller when she joined the cabinet in September 2012 as secretary of state for culture, media and sport even though Theresa May remained as home secretary.
 - The role passed to Sajid Javid and Nicky Morgan when Maria Miller left the cabinet in April 2014. Sajid Javid became a full member of the cabinet as secretary of state for culture, media and sport and Nicky Morgan was attending cabinet as minister for women.
 - Nicky Morgan assumed the whole role of minister for women and equalities when she was appointed secretary of state for education in July 2014.
 - The role passed to Justine Greening, who was already a member of the cabinet, when Nicky Morgan left as part of a reshuffle.
 - Amber Rudd, then home secretary, took over the role when Justine Greening resigned from the cabinet as part of a reshuffle in January 2018.
 - Penny Mordaunt, then secretary of state for international development, assumed the role when Amber Rudd resigned as home secretary in April 2018.
 - The role passed back to Amber Rudd, who had subsequently been reappointed as secretary of state for work and pensions, when Penny Mordaunt left the cabinet as part of a reshuffle in July 2019.
 - Liz Truss, who was already in cabinet at the time, was appointed as minister for women and equalities following Amber Rudd's announcement of her resignation as an MP in September 2019.
- The effect of churn in the ministerial role may have a larger effect on the GEO than on a department. The GEO is a smaller organisation than any line department and as such has less institutional weight of its own. Its ability to deliver consistent policies will be strongly affected by ministerial and internal staff turnover, as well as the status and effectiveness of its ministers and civil servants. Being put in the Cabinet Office will not necessarily reduce churn – that department has consistently had the highest level of staff turnover of any department, with 35% of officials leaving in 2016 and around 27% in 2018.^{9,10}
- There is no inherent problem with dual-role ministers. Many ministers hold dual roles and it has been a common practice for successive governments. The number of dual roles has varied: David Cameron appointed 16 dual ministers in 2016, Theresa May had 10 dual ministers by the end of her term and Boris Johnson appointed 12 in his first reshuffle.¹¹ Ministers who have held joint roles in the past have said that the set up does provide some benefits in joining up related policy areas that may otherwise get stuck within departmental silos.
- However there is always a risk that when a minister has two portfolios, the larger one takes over. Nicky Morgan has spoken of her concern about “a real danger that women and equalities would get squeezed out” when she held the role.¹² Harriet Harman, who held the role twice, described how her private office in 1997 was concerned that she had “enough on her plate” and tried to prevent her from “engaging in it at all in order not to be distracted from my ‘main’ job”.¹³ Despite these concerns we have seen no evidence that the people who hold or have held the role of minister for women and equalities have consciously neglected the role. Many have articulated the special importance they saw in the position and their determination to give it the attention it deserves.
- Overall, our view is that the benefit of having a cabinet-level minister owning this portfolio outweighs the downside of having it be part of a dual role. It gives the relevant issues prominence at the highest level of government. It is easier for a secretary of state to engage with other secretaries of state on the GEO's priority areas than it would be for a dedicated junior minister. Given that the GEO needs to influence across government this point is important.
- A secondary benefit is that having a senior minister in the role increases the attention that can be brought to relevant issues. A secretary of state will normally be able to command more public attention and wider interest than a junior minister. Justine Greening described ‘advocacy’ as a key part of the role when she held it.¹⁴

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- We also believe that putting junior ministers in place to support the work increases the effectiveness of the GEO. While this does incur a marginal cost to their main department in terms of their availability, it provides a net benefit to the whole of government.

The GEO's role in highlighting equality issues that have been exacerbated by the pandemic

- The Covid-19 pandemic has raised a number of equality issues, including the unequal health outcomes experienced by some ethnic minorities;¹⁵ the burden of childcare during school closures falling disproportionately on mothers;¹⁶ and the very different experiences of saving and household expenditure between richer and poorer households.¹⁷
- Since June 2020, following Public Health England's review into disparities in the risks and outcomes of Covid-19, the Minister for Equalities has been leading work on inequality and Covid-19. This work is supported by the Race Disparity Unit, and the two quarterly reports published so far have focused on disparities experienced by ethnic minorities.¹⁸
- While these reports are welcome for the attention they draw to these inequalities, they arguably reveal the limitations of the GEO and related Cabinet Office bodies like the RDU, which are not directly responsible for implementing policy. In spite of the recommendation in the first quarterly report that departments should put in place arrangements for monitoring the impact of their policies on ethnic minorities, there was no evidence by the second quarterly report that such monitoring had become widespread. The second report does include a list of actions that government departments are taking to address disparities caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, but many of the policies listed are schemes that are open to all, rather than ones tailored to addressing disparities suffered by ethnic minorities, or by any other group with protected characteristics. For example, DWP includes the Kickstart Scheme and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund as examples of new initiatives to address disparities, on the grounds that people from ethnic minority backgrounds have access to both schemes. Such general-purpose schemes are unlikely to go far enough in addressing the specific disparities exacerbated by the pandemic, and that departments are relying on these examples to prove progress in meeting the recommendation to develop policy to address disparities suggests that more could be done to put equalities considerations at the heart of the pandemic response.
- Without the ability to require departments to implement any of their recommendations, it is not clear whether the GEO has been able to have a tangible effect in getting departments to monitor their funding – the only example listed in the second quarterly report concerns the Community Champions scheme run by MHCLG.
- The GEO has not published any work on gender comparable to its reports on disparities experienced by ethnic minorities. While women have not been faced with worse health outcomes due to Covid-19, there is evidence that the pandemic has affected gender inequality. With gender pay gap reporting suspended last year, and with companies not required to report until October 2021, this sort of work from the GEO would have been especially valuable.
- There have also been missed opportunities for the government to highlight gender inequality. As an example, the recent Budget makes reference to the effect that school closures have had on working parents, leading them to work fewer hours due to the burdens of childcare.¹⁹ However, given the weight of the available evidence showing that it is working mothers who have taken on the bulk of this childcare, it seemed like a gap for the Budget gloss over the specific harms to women. Though we note that the document elsewhere drew attention to the effect of the pandemic on inequality, pointing out that restrictions have been more likely to hurt workers that are lower-paid, young, female, and from an ethnic minority.

The GEO's role sponsoring the Social Mobility Commission

- The Social Mobility Commission is an advisory non-departmental public body sponsored by DfE.²⁰ It was established on a statutory basis by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016.²¹ It already works with the Cabinet Office, GEO, Race Disparity Unit and the Disability Unit through the Equality Hub.²²
- The GEO currently sponsors the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). The EHRC is a significant public body with a clearly-defined mission and a range of unique statutory powers. It makes sense that it is sponsored by an organisation that is the locus of equality policy within government. A recent IFG report looking at the role of Commissions and Commissioners also argued that there would be benefits to the Cabinet Office sponsoring more of these types of bodies, as that would reinforce the independence of the Commission/er from the department whose work it most closely scrutinises – DfE in the case of the SMC.²³
- Bringing the Social Mobility Commission into the Cabinet Office could also be a positive step. The GEO will now be working closely with, or being advised by, a number of equality bodies in the Cabinet Office. And as inequality involves many dimensions, the possibility for the GEO's work to be informed by all of these different bodies is to be welcomed.
- However, balancing the various dimensions of inequality within policy-making will not be without its difficulties. The GEO will need to continue to ensure that it can meet its requirements under legislation to take protected characteristics into account, alongside the perspective on socioeconomic and geographic inequalities that the SMC should be able to contribute.

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This evidence was prepared on behalf of the Institute for Government by Marcus Shephard and Eleanor Shearer, with support from Alex Thomas and Tim Durrant.

April 2021

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