



Equality Hub

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Dear Caroline,

Thank you for your letter of 27 April 2021. I am pleased to be able to provide the requested written evidence as part of your Committee's inquiry into the work of the Government Equalities Office.

1. My current priorities

Women and the recovery

My current priorities for my brief are on our vital work to build back better, including ensuring that women drive and benefit from the recovery from COVID-19. My priority throughout the past year has been to ensure that women's voices are heard during what has been a particularly isolating period for many. It has been a privilege to listen to women across the country, and be able to feed this into policy-making right across government. Through my work I have, for example, ensured that the experiences of vulnerable women seeking work were shared with those making policy on job support in DWP.

Making sure that women benefit from our recovery is a cross-cutting objective which sits at the heart of government and involves the contributions of policies and projects across many different departments. For instance, the Department for Education is delivering the £2.5 billion National Skills Fund to help adults gain skills they need to improve their job prospects. The Lifetime Skills Guarantee is part of this, which includes access to free 'skills bootcamps', including support for women to access training in digital and technical areas, known to be traditionally male-dominated. We are seeing a high demand for these bootcamps across many sectors and industries, including healthcare, where take up is higher amongst women than men.

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I am also passionate about making it easier for people to work flexibly. We have seen over the past year how we can all benefit from working flexibly, even in industries where it wasn't previously thought possible. We are working to support BEIS to shape the upcoming response to the Good Work Consultation to encourage employers to make flexible working the default. My officials currently sit on the Flexible Working Taskforce and are contributing to the development of guidance on hybrid working for employers, to maximise opportunity for all. We are also working closely with BEIS as they take forward the manifesto commitment to 'encourage flexible working and consult on making flexible working the default unless employers have good reasons not to'. This consultation will be launched in due course.

In addition to hearing the voices of women across the country, it has been essential that we in the Equality Hub are a centre of cutting-edge research. Our Gender and Behavioural Insights programme has created a strong evidence base to show what works to reduce gender inequality in the workplace, including the largest ever social policy trial with jobs website Indeed, which demonstrated that offering flexible working explicitly in job advertisements can increase applications by up to 30%. I am proud that we not only champion equality, but deliver high quality evidence about what can be done to advance equality. I am keen that this programme and the Equality Hub continue to support other Government departments and stakeholders with robust insights and evidence.

Collecting and then sharing data and insights across government is essential to improving outcomes. For example, our evidence and insights on the impact of lockdown measures on working parents' access to childcare helped us secure important changes to social distancing guidance and the introduction of childcare bubbles, enabling more women to balance work and care during the very challenging period. The Equality Hub continues to work across government to support activity to improve the provision of high-quality, flexible and affordable childcare to support working families.

International work

The UK is a world leader on gender equality, and my priority is to ensure we are continuing to share our expertise, whilst also learning from others. In March this year I had the pleasure of delivering the UK's national statement at the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), where I highlighted the ways in which we are championing gender equality in the UK. I also met with stakeholders in the fringes of CSW to discuss the UK's work towards ratifying the Istanbul Convention and our new landmark domestic abuse legislation.

More recently, I joined the Women7 Summit event to give a keynote speech on the UK's gender equality priorities in the context of the UK's G7 Presidency. In this I outlined evidence of the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on women and girls around the world, then set out our Presidency work on gender equality, including the 3Es framework (Empower, Educate, End violence). I spoke on similar themes at a meeting of Commonwealth Ministers for Women's Affairs and Gender and Development on COVID-19 last autumn.

This year has also seen another positive development for women's rights here at home as the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was extended to the Bailiwick of Jersey. Later this month, I am delighted to be travelling to

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Jersey to celebrate and mark this achievement with the Jersey Government; I look forward to participating in a panel discussion on CEDAW to consider how we can accelerate progress on women's rights in the future.

I look forward to other opportunities to represent the UK's agenda on gender equality.

2. How much of your working time as a Minister is devoted to your equalities role? In a typical month how much time do you devote to this role, compared to your role in DfE?

We take a whole government approach to improving equality of opportunity and enhancing the life chances of everyone in the UK. I feel fortunate that there is a great deal of crossover between my work as Minister for Women and my education brief, and so I routinely reflect this in my approach, and do not see the time I spend as entirely separate. I am driving forward work relating to both my Ministerial roles, for example considering safeguarding of children and wider concerns about attitudes towards girls and their safety. I recently met with Everyone's Invited where we discussed not only the testimonies in relation to school environments but also across society. Similarly, for International Women's Day this year, in addition to leading the Lords debate, I was able to take part in a communications campaign to promote and inspire young women to consider careers in STEM and what industries can do to support them. I see the dual-departmental aspect of my role to be a strength in enabling us to ensure that equality and fairness is at the heart of everything we do.

As referenced above, my work in listening to women's voices and engaging with stakeholders is an essential part of my role as Minister for Women, and where I feel I can channel uniquely valuable insights for policy-making. I have had the pleasure of hosting virtual roundtables across the country, in addition to engaging with a wide range of organisations and business, and fulfilling our international obligations to ensure gender equality is at the heart of everything we do both at home and abroad.

As the sole Lords Minister for equality business, a significant part of my time is spent preparing for and fulfilling Parliamentary duties and obligations. This includes regular appearances for oral and urgent questions, statements to the House and taking part in debates. Over the last couple of months, this has included the Urgent Question repeat on the second quarterly report on the impact of COVID-19 on ethnic minorities, the Oral Statement repeat on the Commission on Racial and Ethnic Disparities, two oral questions and closing the 5 hour debate to mark International Women's Day. The volume of Parliamentary work on equality and fairness means that I am in regular contact with Equality Hub officials, with briefings taking place on average once a week during sitting time. This is in addition to formal updates and engagement with my officials on our workstreams.

3. How do you divide your working time between specific equalities policies or projects and stakeholder engagement? How many equality stakeholder meetings do you attend in a typical month?

I meet regularly with relevant stakeholders, and the type and frequency of my engagement is dependent upon the nature of the policy work.

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Over the past quarter, my engagement with stakeholders has been part of international work, as well as hosting roundtables with women to discuss their experiences during the pandemic, as outlined above. The latter have allowed me to hear about the impact of COVID-19 on women's lives, and to inform our work ensuring that we build back better and fairer for all.

I have also had several meetings to date with the senior business leaders of the Women's Business Council who represent construction, tech, retail and finance and insurance sectors. I recently met with the Council's Construction leads and some of their female employees as part of a visits programme with a STEM focus. This enabled me to hear how the sector, through the Women's Business Council, is working to create a more inclusive culture and to understand and mitigate the impact of COVID-19. I enjoyed hearing first-hand from women working in construction about what has worked to support them and what challenges remain, as part of the Equality Hub's evidence gathering. I will be meeting with the Council's Tech lead and some of their female employees later this month.

4. Which Inter-ministerial Groups do you attend at which equalities issues are addressed? How often do these groups meet?

Equality and fairness is an integral part of policy-making and decision-making processes, and of course the public sector equality duty applies right across government. My attendance at formal Inter-Ministerial Groups or other Ministerial meetings is therefore dependent upon need and the particular focus of policy issues.

As part of my role as Minister for Women, I also regularly meet with Ministers from other departments to discuss areas of shared concern and priority, such as with the Minister for Safeguarding in regard to women's safety.

5. How often have you met with the Minister for Women and Equalities to discuss progress across government in relation to your equalities brief?

I am in regular contact with the Minister for Women and Equalities, including both formal meetings where we can review progress together as well as more informal contacts and discussions around priority work and live issues.

6. How often have you, the Minister for Women and Equalities and the Minister for Equalities met as a ministerial team to discuss equalities issues and priorities for your respective equalities briefs?

As a Ministerial team, we are in regular contact. As noted above, this includes both formal meetings and more ad hoc communication depending on priorities and live issues.

7. How many staff, at what grades, and in which departments, support you in your equalities role?

Within the Equality Hub, staff work flexibly across teams and grades to deliver Ministerial priorities. I understand the Director of the Equality Hub has provided further details on the staffing of the Hub. I have a regular monthly meeting with Equality Hub officials to discuss progress against my priorities, and this is supplemented by additional meetings depending on current work; regular written updates, and frequent briefing on equality issues as they arise in

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Parliamentary business.

It is also worth noting that the cross-departmental nature of much of the Equality Hub's remit means that officials in other Government departments (for example, BEIS as outlined above) are involved in developing and delivering on equality priorities, liaising closely with Equality Hub staff.

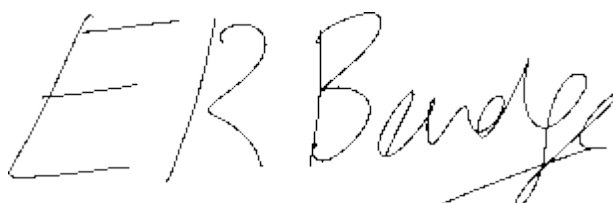
8. How will the equalities agenda be driven by the new No. 10 Delivery Unit?

At the end of January, No.10 announced a review of Government delivery, led by Sir Michael Barber. This was to ensure that as we build back better from the pandemic the Government is fully geared up to deliver our priorities swiftly and effectively, and make a tangible difference to people's lives - in particular, that we deliver on our commitments to unite and level up the country by spreading opportunity.

The new No.10 Delivery Unit will be headed up by Dr Emily Lawson, who has led on the operational delivery of the vaccination programme in the NHS. The new team will be made up of both officials and others with key skills, such as auditors and data scientists. The Equality Hub as part of the Cabinet Office will work closely with the Unit alongside Treasury and other relevant Government departments - and beyond - to further improve policy delivery, and ensure we're delivering on our commitments swiftly.

Thank you once again for your invitation to provide written evidence, and I hope the information provided is helpful to your inquiry. I look forward to working with you on this inquiry and beyond.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "ER Berridge". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending from the bottom of the name.

BARONESS BERRIDGE
Minister for Women

May 2021