

Witness Name: Marcus Bell

Statement No.: Second

Exhibits: Nine

Dated: 20 April 2023

## UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

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### SECOND WITNESS STATEMENT OF MARCUS BELL

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I, Marcus Bell, will say as follows: -

1. I make this second statement on behalf of the Equality Hub for the purposes of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry. The aim of this statement is to provide an overview of the role of the Equality Hub, and its predecessor units, in respect of resilience and preparedness of the United Kingdom between 11 June 2009 - 21 January 2020.
2. I am Director of the Equality Hub which is based in the Cabinet Office and focused on disability policy, ethnic disparities, gender equality, LGBT rights and the overall framework of equality legislation for the UK. This is a post I have held since September 2020. Prior to this I was Director of the Race Disparity Unit (RDU) and Disability Unit (DU) - two of the component units of the Equality Hub - in the Cabinet Office. I joined the Cabinet Office in 2016 after having held a number of senior posts in the Department for Education (DfE) and the Ministry of Justice.
3. I make this statement from information and documents within my personal knowledge; information provided to me by colleagues within the Equality Hub; and my own experience of the functions and operation of government. The content of this statement is true to the best of my knowledge and belief.

#### **The Equality Hub**

4. The Equality Hub was created in September 2020, when the RDU, the DU and the Government Equalities Office (GEO) were brought together. The Social Mobility

Commission (SMC) secretariat joined the Equality Hub in April 2021. Prior to September 2020 the RDU and the DU had a shared Director and GEO had its own Director. Following the Equality Hub's creation, I became the sole Director for all the units. Leadership arrangements of the units are set out later in this statement. The four units were originally sited in different government departments, and transitioned to the Cabinet Office as set out below:

- a. RDU was established in the Cabinet Office in September 2016.
  - b. DU staff were transferred from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP, where they were part of the Office for Disability Issues) in November 2019.
  - c. GEO transferred from the DfE in April 2019.
  - d. The SMC secretariat transferred from DfE in April 2021 to be part of the Equality Hub.
5. The units have their own areas of policy responsibilities, with a Deputy Director responsible for the different policy areas **Exhibit MB/1 [INQ000083932]**. Since being brought together under the umbrella of the Equality Hub, the units have shared operational functions. This includes data and analysis, communications, operations and parliamentary/correspondence functions. The exception to this is the SMC Secretariat which has separate operational functions to maintain independence as it reports to the Commissioners rather than Ministers.
6. The Equality Hub agrees its budget and headcount as a whole with the Cabinet Office and this is then allocated across the teams in each unit. The number of full time equivalent staff in the Equality Hub was 170 in 2019/20 (GEO, RDU and DU only), 163.5 in 2020/21 and 201.5 in 2021/22 (including the SMC). Data is not available for SMC in 2019/20 and 2020/21 as it was based in a different department. Deputy Directors within the Equality Hub report directly to me, and we regularly convene senior leadership meetings.

7. The Equality Hub is responsible for cross-government policy on disability, ethnic disparities, gender equality, Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) rights and also the overall framework of equality legislation for the UK (Equality Act 2006 and Equality Act 2010). It is not responsible for policies related to the protected characteristics of age and religion or belief. Responsibility for age sits across multiple departments depending on the subject area, e.g. Health with the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) or Pensions with DWP. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) is responsible for religion or belief. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities was previously known as the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG, name changed September 2021). Both are used in this statement. The Equality Hub also sponsors two arm's-length bodies (ALBs), the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and the SMC, the secretariat of which sits within the Equality Hub. Sponsorship of ALBs involves "delivering effective relationships between departments and their ALBs, [to ensure] the efficient and effective public outcomes that Parliament and the public expect" **Exhibit MB/2 [INQ000089721]**. This includes agreeing budgets and public appointments to the ALBs such as the commissioners.
  
8. The Equality Hub's work generally falls into three key areas:
  - a. policies that are solely the responsibility of the Equality Hub, eg. legislating to ban conversion practices;
  
  - b. policies and pilot programmes that are developed within the Equality Hub and then handed over to other government departments to lead, e.g. LGBT bullying which is now the responsibility of DfE; and
  
  - c. advising and supporting other government departments to deliver, drawing on our expertise.

5. Reasonable and proportionate searches have been conducted and I can confirm that neither the RDU or DU was involved in any work related to identifying risks in respect of how the UK Government were planning to respond to whole-system civil emergencies, including a pandemic, and they did not contribute to the design or preparation of policy responses of the UK Government in the event of a pandemic.
6. Individual government departments are responsible for understanding the equality impacts of their own policies through compliance with the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED). The Equality Hub does not routinely review or monitor other government departments' equality impact assessments or their approach to PSED. This includes their approach to risk assessment and planning for civil contingencies.
7. As stated above, the SMC secretariat moved to the Equality Hub after the period covered by this witness statement. The secretariat is responsible for supporting the work of the SMC's commissioners. The SMC is an arm's-length body with statutory responsibilities, which does not include civil contingency preparations.
8. Between June 2009 and January 2020 GEO was based in a number of different government departments. I was not Director of GEO for any of the period covered by this witness statement. My staff have carried out a proportionate review of our records and spoken to long-serving GEO staff members. I am satisfied that GEO were not involved in any work related to identifying risks in respect of how the UK Government were planning to respond to whole-system civil emergencies, including a pandemic, and did not contribute to the design or preparation of policy responses of the UK Government in the event of a pandemic.
9. Having not been involved in any of this work, I do not have any reflections on the state of UK's planning, preparedness and resilience to a pandemic before January 2020.
10. The Equality Hub held a lessons learnt session on our involvement in the Covid-19 response on 18 November 2021 **Exhibit MB/3 [INQ000101263]**. I chaired this and it was attended by relevant policy leads from the RDU, GEO and DU. This session was based around the following themes: redeployment (within the Equality

Hub and across Whitehall), ways of working (with the COVID-19 Taskforce and other government departments, and home-working) and communications.

### **History of the Government Equalities Office**

11. GEO was based in a number of different departments between June 2009 - January 2020, and provided corporate reporting (staffing, deliverables and budgets) through those departments.
  - a. GEO was established as an independent department in 2007 overseen by the Minister for Women and Equalities, Harriet Harman KC MP until May 2010 **Exhibit MB/4 [INQ000101257]**.
  - b. The Rt Hon Theresa May MP was Minister for Women and Equalities between May 2010 - September 2012, alongside being Home Secretary. During this time GEO stopped being an independent department, and moved into the Home Office in April 2011 **Exhibit MB/5 [INQ000101258]**.
  - c. The Rt Hon Maria Miller MP was Minister for Women and Equalities from September 2012 - April 2014, alongside Secretary of State at the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS). GEO moved into DCMS in September 2012 **Exhibit MB/6 [INQ000101259]**.
  - d. Between April 2014 - July 2014 the portfolio was shared. The Rt Hon Baroness Nicky Morgan was Minister for Women and the Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP was Minister for Equalities.
  - e. The Rt Hon Baroness Nicky Morgan was Minister for Women and Equalities from July 2014 - July 2016, alongside Secretary of State at the Department for Education. GEO transferred to DfE in September 2015 **Exhibit MB/7 [INQ000101260]**.
  - f. The Rt Hon Justine Greening was Minister for Women and Equalities from July 2016 - January 2018, alongside Secretary of State for Education.
  - g. The Rt Hon Amber Rudd was Minister for Women and Equalities from January 2018 - April 2018. GEO transferred to the Home Office in January 2018 **Exhibit MB/8 [INQ000101261]**.

- h. The Rt Hon Penny Mordaunt MP was Minister for Women and Equalities from April 2018 - July 2019, alongside Secretary of State for International Trade. GEO transferred to the Department for International Trade (DIT) in April 2018. In April 2019, to end the previous process of GEO being based in the same department as the Minister for Women and Equalities, it was decided that GEO should be permanently based in the Cabinet Office **Exhibit MB/9 [INQ000101262]**.
- i. The Rt Hon Amber Rudd was Minister for Women and Equalities again from July 2019 - September 2019, alongside Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.
- j. The Rt Hon Elizabeth Truss MP was Minister for Women and Equalities from September 2019 - September 2022, with GEO continuing to be based in the Cabinet Office.

**Statement of Truth**

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Personal Data

**Signed:**

**Dated:** 20.04.23