

Witness Name: Elizabeth Truss MP

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THE UNITED KINGDOM COVID 19 INQUIRY
WITNESS STATEMENT OF ELIZABETH TRUSS
MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR SOUTH WEST NORFOLK

I, Elizabeth Truss, will state as follows:

Introduction

1. I am providing this witness statement to explain my role as Minister for Women and Equalities during the period January 2020 and February 2022. This witness statement is provided in response to a Rule 9 Request which was addressed to me through the Equality Hub. Accordingly, the statement focuses on my work overseeing the Equality Hub rather than my wider portfolio of work associated with my other ministerial positions.
2. I make this statement from information and documents within my personal knowledge; information provided to me by colleagues within my Private Office, 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. Within the limited time and using those resources made available to me, I have endeavoured to give an accurate account of the key aspects of my involvement, through the Equality Hub, in the core political and administrative decision-making relating to the UK's response to Covid-19. It has not been possible for me to undertake a comprehensive review of all my emails and documents. I recognise that further documents and emails might be brought to my attention at a later date, and I would, therefore, welcome the opportunity to supplement, clarify and / or to update my evidence (if necessary) in the light of any such documents.
3. I can confirm that I was not involved in any WhatsApp or text message communications relevant to the UK's core political and administrative decision-making in relation to the Covid-19 during the specified period.

Political Career

4. I was elected as member of parliament for South West Norfolk in May 2010. I served as Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for the Department of Education from September 2012 to July 2014. I was the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for July 2014 to July 2016. I was the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice from July 2016 to June 2017. From June 2017 to July 2019 I was the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. From 24 July 2019 to 15 September 2021, I was Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade. In that role, I was responsible for establishing the first independent tariff regime, secured new trade deals with important partners such as Japan, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. I also began trade negotiations with the United States of America. From 15 September 2021 to 6 September 2022, I was the Foreign Secretary. Of particular relevance to this witness statement, from 10 September 2019 to 6 September 2022 I was also the Minister for Women and Equalities, supported by and responsible for the Government Equalities Office (“GEO”) and, once it was formed in September 2020, the Equality Hub. This role ran alongside my responsibilities as Secretary of State for Trade and Foreign Secretary. From 6 September 2022 to 25 October 2022, I was the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

The Responsibilities of the Minister for Women and Equalities

5. My specific responsibilities as Minister for Women and Equalities between 10 September 2019 to 6 September 2022, included:
 - a. promoting equality of opportunity for everyone and reducing negative disparities.
 - b. strategic oversight of Government’s equality policy for women, ethnicity and LGBT equality.
 - c. sponsorship of the Equality and Human Rights Commission and, following an April 2021 machinery of government move, the Social Mobility Commission.
 - d. oversight of the overarching equalities legislative framework, including the Equality Act [LT/1 – INQ000207462].

6. I am aware that Mr Marcus Bell (Director of the Equality Hub) has provided a corporate statement which explains the make-up and role of the GEO and the Equality Hub. To avoid unnecessary duplication, and in the interests of brevity, I defer to Mr Bell's statement for his overview of the structure of the Equality Hub and the detailed work being conducted by officials.
7. As Minister for Women and Equalities I had overall responsibility for the Equality Hub's work (except disability policies). Considering my wider ministerial responsibilities, I appropriately delegated many of the work streams to junior ministers and in particular to Kemi Badenoch as the Minister for Equalities between 16 February 2020 and February 2022.
8. The Women & Equalities ministerial team divided its work as follows:
 - a. As the Minister for Women and Equalities, I had overall responsibility for the Equality Hub's work (except disability policies), and decided how to delegate responsibilities and workstreams to junior ministers.
 - b. While I was in post, Junior Minister roles were organised such that:
 - i. Kemi Badenoch MP held the post of Minister for Equalities from February 2020 to July 2022, based in Her Majesty's Treasury ("HMT") and then the Department for Levelling up, Housing and Communities ("DLUHC") from September 2021. During this period she had delegated responsibility for the Covid Disparity Reports, reporting directly to the Prime Minister on this work.
 - ii. Mike Freer MP held the post of Minister for Equalities, with specific responsibility for LGBT policy, from September 2021 to July 2022, based in Department for International Trade ("DIT").
 - iii. The Minister for Women role was held by Baroness Berridge of The Vale of Catmose from February 2020 to September 2021, based in Department of Education ("DOE"); followed by Baroness Stedman-Scott OBE from September 2021 to September 2022, based in Department for Work and Pensions ("DWP").
 - iv. The Minister for Disabled People post was held by Justin Tomlinson MP from 2019 to September 2021, based in DWP; followed by the Rt Hon Chloe Smith MP from September 2021 to September 2022, based in

DWP. The Minister for Disabled People reports into the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions. This role was held by The Rt Hon Thérèse Coffey MP from September 2019 to September 2022.

9. My working relationship with my colleagues within the Women & Equalities Ministerial Team was mostly conducted through ministerial team meetings, which were supplemented by bilateral meetings where needed.

Introduction to Covid-19 key workstreams

10. On 22 April 2020, I gave oral evidence to Women and Equalities Committee in a session dedicated to 'Unequal impact: Coronavirus (Covid-19) and the impact on people with protected characteristics' [LT/2 – INQ000089800]. I started my oral evidence session by setting out my priorities for the GEO, as it then was. In summary I explained that the particular focus of the GEO's work had been on Covid; both in responding to the immediate equalities workstreams during the crisis itself and also in ensuring that the plan for recovery benefitted everyone across the nation equally (reflecting the aims of the Government's levelling up agenda).
11. On 25 May 2021, I again gave oral evidence alongside Marcus Bell to Women and Equalities Committee in a session dedicated to 'The role of the GEO: embedding equalities across Government' [LT/3 - INQ000089733]. In that session I described my position as the head of equality, overall, for the Government, which I consider to be an accurate description of my role at that time.
12. In these evidence sessions I explained that my priorities at the time were:
 - a. **Reshaping the Equality Hub** – I explained that this involved the reshaping of the GEO and bringing it together with the Racial Disparity Unit and the Disability Unit (within the Cabinet Office) to create a single equalities hub.
 - b. **Women's economic empowerment** - I explained that the economic empowerment of women would be a particularly important focus as the country moved from the immediate issues of Covid into the process of recovery.

- c. **International work** – I explained that this was another area on which we were focussed and that the international LGBT conference that had been planned for May, regrettably had been postponed as a result of the pandemic.
- d. **Gender Recognition Act** - I explained that there had been a lot of work done internally on the issue of the Gender Recognition Act both to prepare to respond to the consultation and to launch the Government's proposals for the future of the Act.

13. In addition to the issues explained above:

- a. **Quarterly reports on progress to address COVID-19 health inequalities** – While the Minister for Equalities held delegated responsibility for the quarterly reports, and therefore reported directly to the Prime Minister rather than myself, I did offer to support her with any additional ministerial input she may find helpful.
- b. **Involvement in Key Decision-Making Forums** – I was not involved in key Covid-19 decision-making forums, such as the Covid-19 Operations Committee (Covid-O) or the Covid-19 Strategy Committee (Covid-S), in my capacity as Minister for Women and Equalities. However, I did attend Cabinet and was able to participate in Cabinet discussions and decision-making. This included my presentation of the plans of the Gender Equality Advisory Council ("GEAC"), at a Cabinet meeting on 9 March 2021 [LT/4 - INQ000088975], which included a strong focus on building back better for women and girls from the pandemic.
- c. **Women and Equalities Select Committee Evidence Sessions** – I gave evidence to the Women and Equalities Select Committee on the work of the Equality Hub during this period. Specifically, I attended the Committee on 22 April 2020 to provide oral evidence in the session relating to: 'Unequal impact: Coronavirus (Covid-19) and the impact on people with protected characteristics' [LT/2 – INQ000089800] and on 25 May 2021 I attended the Women and Equalities Committee to provide oral evidence in the session relating to: 'The Role of the GEO' [LT/5 - INQ000089822].

- d. **Recruitment to the Equality and Human Rights Commission (“EHRC”) –** I recruited a number of Commissioners to the EHRC during this period, including the Commission’s Chair. In doing so, I ensured the Commission had the skills and leadership to carry out its role during the pandemic. In particular I appointed Lord Ribeiro in November 2020, a former President of the Royal College of Surgeons, in order to strengthen the EHRC’s medical and public health expertise during the pandemic.

- e. **Public Sector Equality Duty (“PSED”) and Equality Impact Assessment (“EIA”)** - I maintained the position, in line with EHRC guidance, that the duty is on the decision maker personally in terms of what he or she knew and took into account, therefore, I was clear that individual government departments are responsible for understanding the equality impacts of their own policies and that it would not be appropriate to attempt to outsource equality impact assessments and other such work to the Equality Hub. Given this, I was not routinely involved in reviewing or monitoring other government departments’ EIA or their approach to PSED. However, the Hub did occasionally give guidance to departments about their equality duties and, given the exceptional circumstances, did contribute to a number of PSED assessments at the COVID Taskforce’s request during the period April 2020 to August 2020. These are set out in more detail in Marcus Bell’s statement.

Redeployment of Equality Hub Staff

- 14. At the outset of the pandemic, I was supportive of the redeployment of Equality Hub staff to critical functions across government in order to assist the national effort. I saw this as a positive way for the Equality Hub staff to embed their expertise in other departments.

- 15. Redeployments began following the national lockdown on 24 March 2020. Fifty-one staff members of the Disparity Unit (“DU”), Race Disparity Unit (“RDU”), and GEO were redeployed to help the pandemic effort. This included, for example, the redeployment of the Equality Hub’s Director to work as Director of Shielding Data in the Government Digital Service, where he was responsible for building the data system for distribution of essential supplies to Clinically Extremely Vulnerable peoples.

16. WESC, as part of its ongoing inquiry into the role of the GEO, requested further details about redeployments, which included a breakdown by grade and department [LT/6 - INQ000083920]. Initial redeployments were for 3 months, with some extended depending on the needs of the role in which they were operating. In addition, staff were moved across DU, GEO and RDU to support the Equality Hub's involvement in the response.
17. RDU and DU's role in relation to Covid was recognised by the Cabinet Office through reclassification as "business critical functions". DU was added to the Critical Function list on 14 April 2020 and RDU added in June 2020. "Business critical" status meant these two units were protected from being required to redeploy staff elsewhere in government, and were able to request additional staff.

Quarterly reports on progress to address COVID-19 health inequalities

18. On 2 June 2020, Public Health England ("PHE") published its review into disparities in the risks and outcomes of COVID-19 [LT/7 – INQ000089740]. The Prime Minister invited Kemi Badenoch to lead on work by the Government in response to the PHE review. I was not involved in discussions with the Prime Minister to appoint Minister Badenoch or set the terms of reference of this work but, once aware, had a high level of confidence that Minister Badenoch would deliver it to a high standard. Minister Badenoch spent a great deal of time on this work and was thoroughly invested in it. I did not feel the need to intervene but made clear to Minister Badenoch that if she required my ministerial input I would be very happy to support her. Minister Badenoch's and the Equality Hub's work in this area is best understood by reading the four 'quarterly report on progress to address COVID-19 health inequalities' which were published in October 2020; February 2021; May 2021; and December 2021. Minister Badenoch kept me updated on this work through our ministerial team meetings.

Women and Equalities Select Committee Evidence Sessions

19. On 22 April 2020, I attended the Women and Equalities Committee ("WESC") to provide oral evidence in the session relating to: 'Unequal impact: Coronavirus (Covid-19) and the impact on people with protected characteristics' [LT/2 – INQ000089800].
20. On 10 June 2020, the Women and Equalities Committee launched three new inquiries covering:

- a. Coronavirus and BAME people;
- b. Gendered economic impact; and
- c. Disability and access to services [LT/8 - INQ000207470].

On 25 May 2021, I attended the Women and Equalities Committee to provide oral evidence in the session relating to: 'The Role of the GEO' [LT/5 - INQ000089822]

- 21. Following this appearance, the Chair, Caroline Nokes, wrote to me to request additional information about the PSED assessment for the Coronavirus Act [LT/9 - INQ000089801] and I responded, confirming it was the responsibility of the Department of Health and Social Care ("DHSC") Secretary of State [LT/10 - INQ000089802].
- 22. On 7 July 2021, the WESC held a further one-off oral evidence session following up on the Committee's Covid-19 inquiries. The Equality Hub was represented by Ministers Badenoch, Berridge and Tomlinson as well as by its Director, Marcus Bell, alongside other Government ministers and officials.

Equality and Human Rights Commission

- 23. The Equality and Human Rights Commission ("EHRC") is a statutory body established under the Equality Act 2006. It is an independent body responsible for protecting and promoting equality and human rights in Great Britain. It aims to encourage equality and diversity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, and promote and protect human rights.
- 24. The Commission enforces equality legislation on age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.
- 25. The GEO, and then the Equality Hub, sponsors the EHRC and so I worked with the EHRC on a range of issues and had statutory responsibility for appointing 10 to 15 Commissioners, including the Chair.
- 26. On 24 March 2020 the then Commission Chair, David Isaacs, and I jointly announced the suspension of enforcement of the gender pay gap reporting deadlines for employers due to the Covid-19 pandemic [LT/11 – INQ000207463]. We agreed on this decision, recognising that employers across the country were facing unprecedented uncertainty

and pressure at the time. I was keen to set the tone that we were not going to place extra burdens upon businesses during this time.

27. At the time of the announcement, a quarter of expected reporters had already reported their data and it was decided that the GEO would continue to support those employers who wished to report their data.
28. On 29 June 2020, I began the recruitment process for a new EHRC Chair and board members, with the expectation that the appointments would be made that winter. I hoped that a new Wales Commissioner would be appointed as that role was vacant at the time **[LT/12 - NQ000207466]**.
29. In August 2020, the tenure of the then EHRC Chair, David Isaac came to an end. The then Deputy Chair, Caroline Waters, assumed the role of Interim Chair and the then board member, Susan Johnson, took on the role of Interim Deputy Chair upon Mr Isaac's departure until the new Chair was confirmed.
30. On 15 October 2020, I was able to announce the appointment of Baroness Falkner of Margravine as my preferred candidate for Chair of the EHRC, subject to the formal scrutiny process **[LT/13 - INQ000207468]**. Baroness Falkner appeared at a pre-appointment scrutiny hearing conducted by the WESC and the Joint Committee on Human Rights on 11 November 2020.
31. On 20 October 2020, the EHRC published a research report: "How coronavirus has affected equality and human rights" **[LT/14 - INQ000066533]**. This report summarised evidence that helps us understand the effects of Covid-19 on different groups in society. It highlighted long term risks to equality and human rights covering the areas of work, poverty, education, social care and justice and personal security.
32. On 11 November 2020, I appointed 4 new Commissioners to the Board of the EHRC. These included Lord Riberio, a former president of the Royal College of Surgeons. I appointed him for one year in order to ensure that the EHRC had medical and public health expertise. This was in order to strengthen its work on equalities and human rights during the Covid-19 pandemic **[LT/15 - INQ000207469]**.
33. On 23 February 2021, the EHRC announced that enforcement action against employers failing to report their gender pay gap would re-start on 5 October 2021. I was content

with this decision as it reflected the changing business environment, gave businesses certainty, and allowed an additional six months to report 2020/21 data before legal action would begin.

34. On 30 March 2021, I reappointed Professor Lesley Sawers as Scotland Commissioner of the EHRC until March 2025. As part of that appointment, it was noted that the EHRC had a crucial role to ensure that equality and human rights are at the centre of our shared vision to build our society and our economy back better, fairer and stronger after the pandemic [LT/16 - INQ000207472].

35. On 23 July 2021, a recruitment campaign was launched for a further general EHRC Commissioner appointment (in anticipation of the expiry of Lord Ribeiro's tenure on 1 December 2021) [LT/17 – INQ000207473] and the appointment of a Wales Commissioner [LT/18 - INQ000207458]. Akua Reindorf was subsequently appointed as a general EHRC Commissioner from 1 January 2022. The Equality Act 2006 requires that the appointment of the ECHR's Wales Commissioner is made with the consent of Welsh Ministers. Consent was received in Spring of 2022, enabling the appointment of Eryl Besse as Wales Commissioner from 1 April 2022.

Public Sector Equality Duty and Equality Impact Assessment

36. As Marcus Bell explains in his witness statement, individual government departments are responsible for understanding the equality impacts of their own policies through compliance with the PSED. Neither the Equality Hub nor I were routinely involved in reviewing or monitoring other government departments' EIA or their approach to PSED. As I indicated earlier, it is correct to say that occasionally we were asked to give guidance to departments about their equality duties.

37. On 22 April 2020, while answering questions from the WESC regarding EIA in their session titled 'Unequal impact: Coronavirus (Covid 19) and the impact on people with protected characteristics', I explained the Equality Hub's role in supporting and helping Government Departments in carrying out their own equality impact assessments and explained that the Government Departments retain the ownership of their own EIA and the responsibility for the work in completing them. I was also asked whether the Government would be publishing EIA. In response, I explained that EIA were internal documents the purpose of which is to help inform Government about its own operation. I explained that it would not be appropriate to publish them as to do so would risk

impacting upon the positive frankness with which they are written [LT/2 - INQ000089800].

38. As an example of the support the Equality Hub provided to departments, my colleague Minister Badenoch wrote to all government ministers on 8 December 2021 on the subject of the PSED [LT/19 - INQ000089735]. She reminded them that their departments were responsible for proper consideration of the equality impacts of their policies and of their ongoing duty to consider equality in their work and their departments. She also provided them with advice on how their departments might approach equality impact assessments and the appropriate documentation of their decision making.

39. I also understand that, during the period April 2020 to August 2020, the Equality Hub contributed to a number of PSED assessments at the COVID Taskforce's request. These are set out in more detail in Marcus Bell's statement.

New Fight for Fairness

40. On 17 December 2020, I delivered a speech setting out the Government's new approach to tackling inequality across the UK. In that speech I emphasised that "*We can ill afford to waste ... [the population's] potential as we recover from Covid and build back better.*" [LT/20 - INQ000207460].

41. I also made clear that I viewed some of the changes to working behaviour that we had seen during the pandemic as potentially helping us to widen opportunity. For example, I noted that "*we know that flexible working improves productivity and helps people to combine work with other responsibilities*" and that I viewed flexible working "*not just as a necessity amid the Covid crisis but [as a way] to empower employees*".

Making flexible working standard

42. On 5 March 2021, ahead of International Women's Day, I called for flexible working to be normalised [LT/21 - INQ000207471]. In my view, a national shift towards flexible working would boost productivity and particularly help women, as they are twice as likely as men to work flexibly and reduce geographic inequality as we recovered from Covid-19.

43. I promoted research by the Government-backed Behavioural Insight Team that analysed nearly 20 million job applications, finding that job opportunities explicitly offering flexible working increased applications by 30%. I wanted to set the tone and send a message to employers and employees in this regard. I was not involved in any legislative changes, which would be under the remit of the Business Secretary; my involvement was much more in relation to public facing messaging.

Small to Medium Enterprises leaders to champion LGBT equality

44. On 24 March 2021, I, along with Iain Anderson, Executive Chair of Cicero/AMO, brought together a group of businesses to discuss how Small to Medium Enterprises (“SMEs”), business groups and individuals could work together to support LGBT people in the workplace [LT/22 – INQ000207467]. I wanted to do something positive and supportive following the first year of Covid-19. I was conscious that there was a discrepancy in terms of the support networks available to LGBT people working for big employers and living in cities, compared to those working for SMEs in more rural areas: it was apparent that those working for SMEs received less support, and I was keen to address this. This meeting was held in order to kick start that approach.
45. At this event, I also confirmed the government’s commitment to supporting LGBT people in the workplace as the government pushed for everyone to fully benefit from the Covid-19 recovery.
46. This event was not specifically linked to Covid-19, but it was hoped that the businesses could share best practice and offer an environment where people could thrive, away from harassment or bullying. In addition, the work undertaken to address LGBT people’s disconnection and isolation was made more relevant still by the social distancing required during the pandemic. This meeting was the genesis for a SME network of LGBT groups which was led by Iain Anderson.

UK G7 Presidency: Building back better and fairer for women and girls around the world

47. The UK’s G7 Presidency ran from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2021. Following recommendations from me, in March 2021, Boris Johnson convened an independent group of experts to form the Gender Equality Advisory Council (“GEAC”), tasked with supporting the UK’s G7 Presidency by galvanising ambition on gender equality so that women and girls across the globe could drive and benefit from the pandemic recovery.

48. This initiative represented a continuation of earlier G7 GEAC, the first GEAC having been convened during Canada's 2018 G7 presidency and continued by France in 2019.
49. I was appointed by the Prime Minister to lead the GEAC at a ministerial level, to work closely alongside the Chair, Sarah Sands. My role was to ensure the GEAC had direct contact with the UK government during the UK's G7 presidency. I presented the plans of the GEAC at a Cabinet meeting on 9 March 2021 [LT/4 - INQ000088975].
50. On 25 March 2021, Baroness Berridge delivered the UK's National Statement at the 65th Commission on the Status of Women, held at the United Nations General Assembly. It was set out within that speech that I would lead on establishing the GEAC to ensure our UK G7 Presidency delivered for women and girls – at home and around the world [LT/23 – INQ000216668].
51. The GEAC sought to champion the core principles of freedom, opportunity, individual humanity and dignity for women and girls around the world. This was an opportunity to direct our attention to practical recommendations for how the G7 could work together, against the backdrop of recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, to build back better, ensuring everyone had the opportunity to succeed.
52. I was keen to move the GEAC towards having members who were “do-ers” and able to consider practical solutions, rather than purely academics who were more theory driven. I therefore recommended, and received the Prime Minister's support for, the appointment of a number of leaders in industry and leaders in science. Of particular relevance was the appointment of Professor Dame Sarah Gilbert, Lead researcher at Oxford University for the coronavirus vaccine. This led to the appointment of the full GEAC membership, comprising:
- i. Sarah Sands (Chair), Former editor of the Evening Standard and BBC Radio 4's Today programme
 - ii. Alice P. Albright, CEO of the Global Partnership for Education
 - iii. Professor Jutta Allmendinger, President of the WZB Berlin Social Science Centre and Professor of Sociology at Humboldt University Berlin
 - iv. Hon Julie Bishop, 38th Foreign Minister of Australia and current Chancellor, Australian National University

- v. Professor Iris Bohnet, Albert Pratt Professor of Business and Government and co-director of the Women and Public Policy Program, Harvard Kennedy School
- vi. Ursula M. Burns, Former CEO and Chairwoman of Xerox Corporation, Former leader of the White House STEM Programme
- vii. Dr Fabiola Gianotti, Physicist, Director-General, CERN
- viii. Professor Dame Sarah Gilbert, Lead researcher at Oxford University for the coronavirus vaccine
- ix. Isabelle Hudon, President and CEO of the Business Development Bank of Canada
- x. Dr (H.C.) Ritu Karidhal, Deputy Operations Director to India's Mars Orbiter Mission, Mangalyaan
- xi. Bogolo J. Kennewendo, Global Economist and Former Minister of Investment, Trade and Industry in Botswana
- xii. Professor Reiko Kuroda, Professor of Chemistry & Biology at Chubu University and winner of the L'Oréal-UNESCO award for Women in Science
- xiii. Dr Dambisa Moyo, Global economist and co-principal of Versaca Investments
- xiv. Dr Denis Mukwege, gynaecologist, human rights activist and Nobel peace laureate
- xv. Marie-Christine Saragosse, President and CEO of France Médias Monde
- xvi. Emma Sinclair MBE, Tech entrepreneur, and CoFounder and CEO of EnterpriseAlumni
- xvii. Dr Aldijana Šišić, Chief of the UN Trust Fund to End Violence against Women (UN Women)
- xviii. Dame Rachel de Souza, Children's Commissioner for England
- xix. Jessica Woodroffe, W7 Co-Chair and Director of the Gender and Development Network

53. I supported the GEAC in setting a work programme and the preparation of its report and recommendations. While I was keen for the GEAC to include a focus on supporting women building back better after the pandemic and that it would be a forward-looking exercise, I also respected the GEAC's status as an independent body.

54. I attended the first meeting of the GEAC, which took place on 12 April 2021. During the meeting, I noted that gender equality had been rolled back during the pandemic and that if we were to move forward and build back better, women would have to be central to the effort. I outlined the importance of the GEAC making practical and actionable recommendations, focusing on the areas of education and STEM, economic empowerment, and ending violence against women and girls. I emphasised that gender equality is the responsibility of everyone, and that it must be embedded in G7 ministerial tracks [LT/24 – INQ000207456].
55. A number of themes were discussed at the meeting. In relation to Covid-19, the attendees discussed the importance of integrating a gender equality focus into the Covid-19 response. Attendees noted the importance of female representation in pandemic response leadership, the safety and protection of workers in the information economy and the response to the shadow pandemic of violence against women and girls [LT/25 – INQ000207457].
56. I also attended the second meeting of the Council, which took place on 19 May 2021 [LT/26 - INQ000207464] The meeting was focused primarily on the importance of girls' education and ending violence against women and girls.
57. Ahead of the publication of the GEAC's report and recommendations, in June 2021, the GEAC's recommendations were presented to the G7 Leaders at the Carbis Bay Summit in Cornwall.
58. Those recommendations are reflected within the *Report of the G7 Gender Equality Advisory Council 2021 – Building Back Better for Women and Girls*, which was published on 28 October 2021 [LT/27 - INQ000207459]. The report sought to answer three key questions, including "*How has the Covid-19 pandemic changed the way women and girls, and gender equality are impacted by the issues that the 2021 GEAC raised as areas for particular attention by G7 Leaders?*" The recommendations related to Covid-19 included:
- i. An acknowledgement by G7 leaders of the disproportionate effect of Covid-19 on women and girls, globally, and increased funding for, and dedicated action towards gender-transformative development programming, sexual and reproduction health services, and addressing the 'shadow pandemic' of violence against women and girls;

- ii. A pandemic response and recovery that takes account of the needs of women and girls, and tracks the effect of recovery initiatives on men and women, and includes factors such as age, income, disability and ethnicity.

59. I wrote one of the forewords for this report, alongside Boris Johnson and GEAC Chair Sarah Sands. In it I stated:

“Women have been central to fighting the coronavirus pandemic – as healthcare workers, scientists and leaders. Women and girls must be at the heart of our approach to building back better, creating a better and fairer future for all. I was delighted the UK was able to assemble such a high-calibre pool of experts to help us to deliver for women and girls under our G7 Presidency. GEAC members come from a range of industries and professions, but are united by a desire to see changes, and an ability to get things done. This report is a testament to their commitment and sets out a clear case for where G7 should take actions.”

60. At the same time as the UK’s G7 presidency, on 31 December 2021, I was keen to establish a set procedure for monitoring and accountability on a permanent basis as I felt that this had been lacking previously, where Councils had made recommendations without sufficient attention to implementation. A recommendation to this effect had been included in the GEAC’s report. I wanted to implement, first, a score card or dashboard which would look at general indicators, for instance, women’s employment and pay gaps. Secondly, I wanted to implement a tracker to track specific commitments and whether they had been implemented.

61. At the end of the UK’s presidency, while this had been agreed in principle, further work was needed before formal agreement could be reached as to how this would be implemented on a permanent basis. This work continued under the German G7 Presidency, leading to G7 agreement on a new monitoring mechanism at the June 2022 G7 Summit in Elmau and the establishment of a G7 Dashboard on Gender Gaps. The Dashboard includes key indicators across a range of policy areas that are relevant to the progression of gender equality and will be updated annually by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (“OECD”).

LGBT Business Champion appointed

62. On 10 September 2021, I appointed Iain Anderson as the government's new LGBT business champion. This was partly to support and advance the aims of the government's 'Build Back Better' campaign, which had been announced in March 2021 [LT/28 - INQ000207465].

63. I wanted to appoint Iain as he had considerable experience working with a range of businesses, which was crucial to forming policies that would actually make a difference and improve the workplace for LGBT people.

Initial understanding and response to Covid -19 (January – March 2020)

Initial understanding and readiness

64. I first became aware of Covid-19 in an official capacity, through Cabinet meetings.

65. Following the first national lockdown in March 2020, staff from the Equality Hub / GEO were redeployed as I have described. I thought this was an important and positive part of the Equality Hub's contribution to the Government's response to Covid-19, both in terms of generally supporting resourcing, but also embedding equalities expertise in the different delivery departments. This was something of which I was, therefore, supportive. It reflected my wider view that it would not be possible or effective for the Equality Hub to police or control all equalities work across Government from the centre, but that responsibility for equalities was best held with the departments carrying out the work.

66. As previously stated, the RDU and the DU's role in relation to Covid was later recognised by the Cabinet Office through reclassification as "business critical functions". The DU was added to the Critical Function list on 14 April 2020 and RDU added in June 2020. "Business critical" status meant these two units were protected from being required to redeploy staff elsewhere in government, and were able to request additional staff from that point on. I was content that this reclassification reflected business needs.

67. As Marcus Bell has set out in his witness statement, aside from some engagement from the Disability Unit on accessible communications in mid-March 2020, the organisations that comprise the Equality Hub were not directly involved with the Covid response until after the national lockdown was announced on 23 March 2020 [LT/29 - INQ000083946].

68. Subsequently the Equality Hub's, and its component unit's, principal areas of involvement were:

- i. Production of Covid Disparities Quarterly Reports
- ii. Improving disability data
- iii. Vaccine certification and exemptions
- iv. Advice on PSED and EIA
- v. Understanding the impact on women
- vi. Providing general, ad hoc advice

69. A detailed breakdown of this work can be read in Marcus Bell's statement. As I have explained, given the Prime Minister's delegation of responsibility for the Covid Disparity Reports to Minister Badenoch and the reporting lines of the Disability Unit through DWP ministers, my involvement in Covid-19 decision-making in my equalities capacity, was mostly limited to the routine Cabinet discussions in which all members of the Cabinet participate.

70. I was very conscious from early in the pandemic that there was a risk of a disproportionate impact on different groups. This was something I noted while appearing before the Women & Equalities Select Committee's 'Unequal impact: Coronavirus and the impact on people with protected characteristics' inquiry on 22 April 2020, during which I referenced the work of the Race Disparity Unit with Public Health England and the Department of Health; the ONS on age-related disparities; and the Disability Unit on improving data on disabled people's outcomes.

71. I was particularly aware of the potential risks facing women, and was very supportive of the Home Secretary's "You Are Not Alone" campaign, which sought to reassure domestic violence victims that help was still available. We recognised straight away that this was one of the major issues with the lockdown: that it would put domestic violence victims at potentially more risk of abuse. That is why we were very clear from the start that if you were a victim of domestic abuse, the rules about lockdown and the "stay at home" message did not apply and victims should leave that home if they were able to. We also launched the campaign and the national domestic abuse helpline number. We were extremely worried about this problem.

Initial strategy and decision making

72. I explained my understanding of the UK Government's initial strategy in relation to Covid-19 during my appearance before the Women & Equalities Select Committee's 'Unequal impact: Coronavirus and the impact on people with protected characteristics' inquiry on 22 April 2020 [LT/2 - INQ000089800]. I was clear that the most important thing was to save lives and the government would not lift lockdown until it had fulfilled the conditions of the five tests. Having said that it was right that the government also prepared for the lifting of lockdown and make sure that it has the minimum economic damage that we can deliver.

73. I was also highly conscious of the risk that some groups could be disadvantaged through the imposition as well as the lifting of lockdown. In particular I was very concerned to make sure that minority groups and women did not lose out as we lifted that lockdown. We saw a change in culture during this lockdown. It was clearly incredibly tough for many families across the country, including concerns about domestic violence, but there were also some positives. In terms of increased flexibility of working, a lot of employers who previously said people could not work from home were now finding that they could absolutely deliver from home. I felt that we should take the opportunity to capitalise on some of those cultural changes that have happened to make it easier for people balancing family and career to work from home, to make it more flexible and to challenge the culture of presenteeism, which has been very alive in business and has also been very alive in politics.

74. As I have explained previously, I was not involved in key Covid-19 decision-making forums, such as the Covid-19 Operations Committee (Covid-O) or the Covid-19 Strategy Committee (Covid-X), in my capacity as Minister for Women & Equalities. Given this, as well as the Prime Minister's delegation of responsibility for the Covid Disparity Reports to Minister Badenoch and the reporting lines of the Disability Unit through DWP ministers, my involvement in Covid-19 decision-making in my equalities capacity was mostly limited to the routine Cabinet discussions that all members of the Cabinet participate in.

Role in relation to the impact of Covid-19 and the response to Covid-19 on at risk and other vulnerable groups, including non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs)

75. All major decisions relating to the UK Government's response to COVID-19 were decided by the-then Prime Minister (Boris Johnson). He was closely supported in decision making by senior Cabinet members, but primarily by the former Health Secretaries (Matt Hancock and Sajid Javid), the Chief Medical Officer (Professor Chris Whitty), the Chief Scientific Advisor (Sir Patrick Vallance) and the former Deputy Chief Medical Officer (Jonathan Van Tam). Advice was provided through the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE). Two Cabinet Committees, formed during this time, brought together key ministers for decision making - Covid-19 Operations Committee (chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster) and the Covid-19 Strategy Committee (chaired by the Prime Minister). The Covid 19 Operations Committee's (Covid-O) remit was to deliver the policy and operational response to COVID-19, whilst the Covid-19 Strategy Committee's remit was to drive the Government's strategic response to Covid-19, considering the impact of both the virus and the response to it, and setting the direction for the recovery strategy.

76. While I of course engaged very regularly with ministers from other countries as part of my roles as Trade Secretary and later Foreign Secretary, I did not engage directly with ministers from other countries on Covid-19 in my capacity as Minister for Women & Equalities. I did engage with ministers from other countries indirectly through my sponsorship of the G7 Gender Equality Advisory Council, which produced a number of recommendations relating to Covid-19.

77. It is important to realise that the function of the Equalities Brief is to provide a strategic oversight of equality policy, not to deal with day-to-day operational issues.

Role in public health and coronavirus legislation and regulations

78. I was not involved in key Covid-19 decision-making forums, such as the Covid-19 Operations Committee (Covid-O) or the Covid-19 Strategy Committee (Covid-X), in my capacity as Minister for Women & Equalities. Given this, as well as the Prime Minister's delegation of responsibility for the Covid Disparity Reports to Minister Badenoch and the reporting lines of the Disability Unit through DWP ministers, my involvement in Covid-19 decision-making in my equalities capacity was mostly limited to the routine Cabinet discussions that all members of the Cabinet participate in.

79. As I have set out previously, I maintained the position, in line with EHRC guidance, that the duty is on the decision maker personally in terms of what he or she knew and took into account. Given this, I was not routinely involved in reviewing or monitoring other government departments' equality impact assessments or their approach to PSED. However, the Hub did occasionally give guidance to departments about their equality duties and, given the exceptional circumstances, did contribute to a number of PSED assessments at the COVID Taskforce's request during the period April 2020 to August 2020. These are set out in more detail in Marcus Bell's statement.

Lessons Learned

80. The Minister for Equalities' fourth quarterly report included detailed lessons learnt from the Equality Hub's work and an action plan for addressing some of the longer-term issues identified during the course of the project she was assigned by the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister represented the whole Government, including myself, in accepting these in full. I am also aware that The Equality Hub held a lessons learnt session on 18 November 2021, which I did not attend [LT/30 – INQ000083904].

81. I am satisfied that GEO were not involved in any work related to identifying risks in respect to 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.

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.

Signed:  Personal Data

Dated: 11 July 2023