

Summary

Our inquiry, *The role of the Government Equalities Office (GEO): embedding equalities across government*, examined the structures and mechanisms that underpin the Government's equalities agenda, and how effectively the GEO, and wider Equality Hub, is delivering on its responsibilities.

We welcome the recent expansion of the Government's approach to equalities to include more focus on socio-economic inequality and geographic disparities—part of the “Levelling Up” agenda. We readily accept our role in scrutinising the Government's Levelling Up and social mobility policies, while continuing to have a cross-government scrutiny role in relation to conventional equality issues, as defined by the Equality Act. The Government should bring forward a revised House of Commons Standing Order to better reflect our expanded remit. We have been consistently disappointed with the Government's engagement with our scrutiny to date, and it is particularly disappointing that its apparent unwillingness to be openly scrutinised was reflected in this inquiry, which is at the core of our remit. We hope its response to this Report can be a watershed in its approach to open scrutiny of its equality policies.

The lack of a cross-government, pan-equalities strategy, backed up by annual Action Plans with clear and measurable objectives, is the key weakness in the Government's approach to equality issues. Without an overarching strategy or Action Plans, there is a risk of going backwards on important and hard-won rights for groups of people protected by the Equality Act. The new Equality Data Programme should be seized as an opportunity for the Government to set out, together with its proposed Levelling Up policies, a cross-departmental pan-equalities strategy based on data on the full range of factors, including protected characteristics under the Equality Act and the intersections between them and socio-economic and geographic disparities. Levelling Up and equality should be complementary, high priority agendas, driven by a full-time Secretary of State for Equalities and Levelling Up and a new Cabinet Committee.

The establishment of the Equality Hub, and its permanent place in the Cabinet Office, is positive, but the potential benefits are yet to be realised. The Government's equalities machinery remains fragmented, with ministers dispersed across several disparate departments, and its approach to equality issues lacks coherence. The Equality Hub's structure and objectives are unclear, and it lacks public profile, transparency and accountability. This is unacceptable and must be addressed through regular publication of corporate information and increased public and civil society engagement. Issues including Gender Recognition Act reform and communication of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities' findings have emphasised the need for more effective civil society engagement on sensitive and delicately balanced rights issues. The Government should invite the Equality and Human Rights Commission to lead this work. The Equality Hub should conduct a review of the Government's communications on, and management of, sensitive and balanced rights issues.

The Equality Hub should have been better able to anticipate and mitigate the unequal effects of the pandemic, some of which were predictable. The lessons from this must be learned through the work of the statutory public inquiry next year. The pandemic has demonstrated the vital importance of Equality Impact Assessments, for which

National Risk Register

45. Equally Ours called for learning from the pandemic to include how equality considerations can be built into preparedness for future crises. In line with the conclusions in our Covid-19 Reports, it emphasised that “people and communities who are already experiencing discrimination and inequality are disproportionately impacted in emergencies.” It recommended that “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.”¹¹³

46. In his letter dated 27 May, Marcus Bell told us that the Cabinet Office was currently reviewing its methodology for the National Security Risk Assessment, and that Equality Hub officials “have been involved in early thinking around the impact of risks on vulnerable groups”, which would “ultimately inform the next National Risk Register.”¹¹⁴

International equality commitments

47. The GEO’s Strategic Plan for 2019/20 included an objective to be “an international trailblazer and exceed the UK’s international commitments on equality”.¹¹⁵ It has a direct oversight role in relation to the UK’s implementation of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The Disability Unit in the Equality Hub oversees UK implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Oversight of the UK’s other international equality commitments is fragmented across three other departments, outside of the Equality Hub: Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)); Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD)); and the Ministry of Justice (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the UK’s participation in the Universal Periodic Review process).¹¹⁶

48. The Equality and Human Rights Commission emphasised that there were outstanding concerns highlighted by our predecessor Committee in 2018 about the UK’s implementation of CEDAW, most fundamentally that the UK lacked a “comprehensive implementation strategy”. The UK’s Gender Equality Roadmap omitted to address how the UK Government will “implement the specific recommendations made by the CEDAW Committee in 2019.”¹¹⁷ Other witnesses also reported concerns about the GEO’s implementation of CEDAW.¹¹⁸ Melanie Field, the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s Executive Director for Policy, Strategy, Legal and Wales, told us that she was not aware of any specific work to implement SDG 5, the specific goal in which the UK has committed to achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls by 2030.¹¹⁹

49. More broadly, Baroness Falkner of Margravine, Chair of the Equality and Human

113 Equally Ours ([GEO0047](#)); see also, [Q7](#) [Tansy Hutchinson]

114 Equality Hub ([GEO0055](#))

115 GEO, *GEO Strategic Plan: 2019/20*, July 2019

116 Equality and Human Rights Commission ([GEO0044](#))

117 *Ibid.*

118 See, for example, Nordic Model Now! ([GEO0010](#)); Labour Women’s Declaration ([GEO0010](#));

119 [Q36](#)