

Minister for Women and Equalities Liz Truss sets out priorities to Women and Equalities Select Committee

Thank you to the Committee for convening today.

As you rightly say, the work of the Government Equalities Office has been very focused on Covid, making sure we're dealing with the immediate equalities issues during the crisis, but also making sure that the recovery we're planning benefits all across our nation equally, which is a key part of the Government's levelling up agenda.

In terms of my work as Minister for Women and Equalities we have three key priorities.

First of all reshaping the Government Equalities Office and bringing it more closely together with the Cabinet Office units – so the Racial Disparity Unit and the Disability Unit – to create an equalities hub. My intention is to move the department physically, so that all of those people are sitting together. And also to bring the work more closely together. Because I think we need to move away from the idea that we're simply dealing with groups that need to be catered for and instead make sure that we're looking at individuals across the country and really identifying who are those most in need, where are the biggest barriers to success, and where are the unequal delivery of public services.

So I want the unit to become much more focused on analysing that data, looking at it very closely, and then working to a hub and spoke model with the rest of Government – so whether it's the Home Office on issues of crime, whether it's the Department of education on issues of education, implementing those policies, so that is the change that I am making to the Government Equalities Office, and indeed the whole equalities unit, and I am working very closely with Theo Agnew in the Cabinet Office to do that, because I want our policies to be focused around individual dignity, individual opportunity, and we need to look really at where the biggest barriers are.

And I would like to see us working more closely on issues like geography, so where are communities being held back, and also on issues on background, income, as well as issues of gender, race and disability too. So we have a much more holistic picture. So that's the overall direction I want to take the Government Equalities Office.

A particular focus is going to be women's economic empowerment, and I think this will be particularly important as we leave the immediate issues of Covid and then to the recovery., Of course we've had success in terms of getting more women employed ever before in the UK, but it's nevertheless the case that women are significantly behind comparative countries in terms of setting up businesses and entrepreneurship. We know that it would contribute 10%

extra to GDP if women had the same levels of participation in entrepreneurship as men and one of the things we've done so far is we've hosted a major reception at Number 10 with women entrepreneurs and leading women to move that agenda forward.

I'm very pleased to say that as a result of the recent reshuffle we now have Kemi Badenoch supporting me as Equalities Minister, she's based at the Treasury, which is obviously extremely important in terms of that overall economic agenda, so that has been a major focus.

The other area we're focused on is our international work. We were planning to hold an international LGBT conference in May, regrettably that's had to be postponed due to coronavirus. We do want to hold that conference as soon as possible. We'd already made significant plans, with Nick Herbert to chair the conference, the theme of Safe To Be Me, that is very much about using the UK's strong record in terms of LGBT rights and human rights, to make that case across the globe, and make sure that wherever people live, wherever LGBT people live, they're safe to go about their daily business without fear of crime and harassment, and that is a very important priority. I've already participated in events, in fact in Tokyo, launching the Asian chapter of that initiative, and that's something we want to pursue further.

The final point I'd like to make, Madam Chairman, in this initial part, is on the issue of the Gender Recognition Act. We've been doing a lot of work internally, making sure we're in a position to respond to that consultation and launch what we propose to do on the future of the Gender Recognition Act. We will be in a position to do that by the summer, and there are three very important principles that I will be putting place.

First of all, the protection of single-sex spaces, which is extremely important.

Secondly making sure that transgender adults are free to live their lives as they wish without fear of persecution, whilst maintaining the proper checks and balances in the system.

Finally, which is not a direct issue concerning the Gender Recognition Act, but is relevant, making sure that the under 18s are protected from decisions that they could make, that are irreversible in the future. I believe strongly that adults should have the freedom to lead their lives as they see fit, but I think it's very important that while people are still developing their decision-making capabilities that we protect them from making those irreversible decisions. Of course some of these policies have been delayed, Chair, by the specific issues around Covid but I can assure you that alongside the Covid work, our officials continue to do those things to make them happen.