

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.

Your progression

- Only go outside for food, health reasons or work (but only if you cannot work from home)
- If you go out, stay 2 metres (6ft) away from other people at all times
- Wash your hands as soon as you get home

Do not meet others, even friends or family.

You can spread the virus even if you don't have symptoms.

Government launches plan to tackle loneliness during coronavirus lockdown

- New public campaign launched by Culture Secretary to get people talking openly about loneliness
- Oliver Dowden announces loneliness to be a priority category of £750 million charity funding package
- Guaranteed £5 million boost for national loneliness organisations leading the charge
- Government publishes guidance on supporting yourself and others safely
- Loneliness charities including Age UK will be supported to work with NHS Volunteer Responders in their communities
- Network of high-profile charities, businesses and public figures to join 'Tackling Loneliness Network' formed by Government to help connect groups at risk of isolation

Led by Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden, the plan will aim to ensure that, for people of all ages and backgrounds, staying at home does not need to lead to loneliness.

The latest #Let'sTalkLoneliness public campaign has been rolled out to get people talking openly about loneliness, which includes new public guidance offering useful tips and advice on what to do to look after yourself and others safely.

The campaign, initially launched last year, is being supported by famous faces across social media including TV presenter Angellica Bell and Karen Gibson, founder of The Kingdom Choir. More information can be found at <https://letstalkloneliness.co.uk/>

In a wide ranging cross-Government and cross-sector plan, Dowden has also announced that:

- Smaller, community-based organisations in England helping people to stay connected in local communities will benefit from being a priority category of the £750 million package of support for charities announced by the Chancellor on 8 April.
- National loneliness organisations will be allocated a guaranteed £5 million worth of funding to continue and adapt their critical work at this time.
- As part of the national effort, loneliness charities including Age UK will be supported to work with NHS Volunteer Responders in their communities.

In collaboration with the Connection Coalition, organised by Jo Cox Foundation, the Government has also convened a network of high-profile charities, businesses, organisations and public figures. The group will explore ways to bring people together to build strong community spirit, with a focus on groups at particular risk of loneliness, and will work to continue these initiatives in the future.

Chaired by Minister for Loneliness Baroness Barran, the 'Tackling Loneliness Network' includes the BBC, Premier League, Facebook, ITV, British Red Cross, Jo Cox Foundation, Vodafone, Zurich, Nationwide Building Society, Campaign to End Loneliness, Aviva, Sports and Recreation Alliance, English Football League, JC Decaux UK, Samaritans, Age UK, Arts Council England, Co-op Foundation, The Cares Family, University College London, Independent Age, Libraries Connected, Sense, Manchester Museum, Nesta Challenges and Seema Kennedy, former Co-Chair of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness.

The moves come after the Culture Secretary chaired a virtual summit on Friday (17 April) with a number of loneliness charities including the Jo Cox Foundation, British Red Cross, Campaign to End Loneliness, Co-op Foundation, Age UK, The Cares Family, Mind, Sense and Samaritans, who discussed how to ensure tackling loneliness is a key priority during the pandemic.

Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden said:

Coronavirus and social distancing has forced all of us to look loneliness in the eye. So recognising the signs and tackling the stigma has never been more important.

We're launching this plan now to help ensure no one needs to feel lonely in the weeks ahead. It will help everyone understand the role they can play in looking after each other, and empower our expert charities and volunteers to reach more vulnerable people.

Zoë Abrams, British Red Cross executive director and Loneliness Action Group co-chair said:

It has never been more important that we all pull together to tackle loneliness by building on the sense of community and connectedness that has been so inspiring to see in the face of the coronavirus outbreak.

Today's announcement of investment in this area is critical to help keep funding services and activities that provide a vital lifeline to those who feel lonely and isolated at this time.

Combined with robust policies and practical action across government departments, this should help maintain the momentum on implementing the government's loneliness strategy and ensure that, even whilst this virus keeps us apart, we are making sure that kindness can keep us together".

Catherine Anderson, CEO of The Jo Cox Foundation said:

The priority given to loneliness and social isolation at this time is extremely welcome. Maintaining social connection at a time of physical distancing is vitally important. And when we eventually come out of this crisis the country will emerge stronger and healthier if we act now to establish a legacy of stronger connections that are maintained in the future. The Jo Cox Foundation, along with our many partner organisations in the Connection Coalition, are investing much time and energy in ensuring this happens and we're delighted to be playing a role alongside the government in this important work.

In very different times, Jo correctly identified two essential truths that are now self-evident. Firstly, that social isolation and loneliness do not discriminate. Secondly, that we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us.

Ruth Sutherland, CEO of Samaritans, said:

Loneliness is a deeply personal experience which means different things to people, often affecting them in different ways. Whilst suicide is rarely caused by a single factor, we know that there can be a connection between loneliness and suicidal thoughts for some people, so this investment to tackle loneliness is critical during this difficult time. Whilst physical isolation is a necessary outcome of the lockdown restrictions, loneliness doesn't have to be if we work together to look after each other.

ENDS

Notes to Editor

Three tangible actions for anyone feeling lonely and three actions for people wanting to help If you are lonely you can:

- Keep in touch with friends, family and neighbours
- Ask for help if you need shopping, medicine or are feeling lonely
- Set a routine with online activities, regular tasks or by volunteering

If you are worried about someone who is lonely:

- Phone a friend or family member you think may be lonely
- Smile, wave or chat from a safe distance with a neighbour
- Help out through volunteering by picking up food, medicine or by offering regular conversation to someone living alone

Over the last two years, the UK Government has been leading the way on tackling loneliness:

- It created the world's first Minister for Loneliness and published the world's first Government loneliness [strategy](#) in October 2018, containing 60 commitments from nine Government departments. Implementation of the strategy is ongoing and the Government published a first [annual report](#) in January 2020 setting out our progress;
- It launched the first Government fund dedicated to reducing loneliness worth £11.5 million, which is supporting 126 projects to transform the lives of thousands of lonely people across England;
- It launched the inaugural [#LetsTalkLoneliness](#) campaign in June 2019 to help raise awareness and tackle stigma.

Your development

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You can spread the virus even if you don't have symptoms.

19,000 British travellers return from

cruise ships after major international effort

Working alongside industry, the Government has helped passengers return to the UK from 59 cruise ships from across the world.

More than 19,000 British holidaymakers caught up in the coronavirus crisis on cruise ships across the world have now returned to the UK.

The final group of British passengers are expected to disembark the Costa Deliziosa in Genoa today, taking the total number of British Nationals to return from 59 cruise liners to 19,180.

Cruise ships and their passengers were particularly impacted by the global outbreak of coronavirus due to the nature and design of a ship's environment, the higher volume and density of people on board, and the social mixing.

The first repatriation of British cruise ship passengers took place on February 21, with the evacuation of the 78 British nationals from the Diamond Princess in Japan.

Work intensified after the FCO advised against vulnerable people travelling on cruise ships on March 12. And major efforts have included the repatriation of more than 669 British nationals from the MS Braemar in Cuba, 135 British travellers from the Grand Princess in California, more than 350 from the Coral Princess in Florida, and a further 211 British holidaymakers from the Zaandam and Rotterdam cruise ships, also in Florida, earlier this month.

Efforts to repatriate holidaymakers have seen British embassies work with international militaries, including the Mexican Navy and National Guard who helped evacuate passengers from the Marella Explorer II, work closely on complex rescue missions with countries such as Cuba after the MS Braemar was turned away from numerous ports because infected passengers were on board, and lobby world leaders to ensure ships could dock, passengers could travel back to the UK and those requiring medical help received it.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said:

Ensuring the safety of British nationals overseas is our number one priority, and I am pleased more than 19,000 British cruise ship passengers have now been reunited with their families.

This repatriation effort would not have been possible without the co-operation of partners across the world, including Japan, Cuba, Italy, Mexico and US, and I am extremely grateful for their assistance.

This UK Government effort has involved hundreds of Foreign Office staff working across five continents and 13 time zones, monitoring 59 cruise ships over 68 days, and liaising closely with the governments of more than 20 countries. Working with the Department for Transport, and the cruise ship industry, UK Embassies, High Commissions and Consulates General have facilitated the repatriations, while a 24-hour crisis team, including military experts and transport specialists, has been operating in London.

The Foreign Secretary and other Foreign Office Ministers lobbied counterparts across the world to secure the safe return of thousands of British nationals from the Americas, Asia and Europe.

[UK brings home 19,000 British travellers from cruise ships](#)