

Submission by Northern Ireland Women's European Platform to The role of the GEO: embedding equalities across Government

February 2021

1. Introduction

Northern Ireland Women's European Platform welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to this Inquiry.

Northern Ireland Women's European Platform (hereafter NIWEP) is a membership organisation working to ensure the voice of women in Northern Ireland is heard at the national and international level. We work with our members and partners to represent Northern Ireland at the UN as well as at the European Women's Lobby. Our core role is to coordinate the response to international human rights processes, in particular CEDAW. At the local level, our work focuses on sharing information and building capacity on international human rights instruments and mechanisms for gender equality, in order to support advocacy for gender equality. We also work with policy makers to inform gender responsive policy making.

NIWEP is an NGO in consultative status with ECOSOC, and has a role in representing women in Northern Ireland at the UN. NIWEP has participated in and contributed to the Commission on the Status of Women conference for over two decades, and in this role has engaged with GEO as the lead for the UK at CSW.

For clarity, NIWEP incorporates everyone who identifies as female in the term 'women and girls', building in action on intersecting inequalities experienced by many women and girls due to their specific background and characteristics. We urge for any review of GEO to include a specific consideration of how an inclusive approach can be developed. All references to 'women and girls' should be read in this context throughout the submission.

Summary: Key messages

Role of GEO: Retain GEO as coordinating function, with clarified and strengthened role

NIWEP believes that GEO as an entity provides a crucial function in coordinating work on equality across Departments and in particular in highlighting gender equality across policy areas. A well functioning core coordination function is valuable in ensuring that all Departments develop and use a robust, coherent evidence base on equalities issues, that capacity building across Departments is cohesive and based on the latest evidence, and that the UK's international obligations inform policy and decision making adequately and appropriately. Therefore, NIWEP would urge for GEO as the overarching lead function for equality to be retained, without breaking up functions or separating responsibility for different elements of equality legislation and policy across several units.

However, NIWEP would welcome a clearer, stronger role for GEO in doing this, to ensure that equality is considered effectively in policy making across Departments and policy areas. Specifically, it would be helpful to clarify the role of GEO as adviser to Ministers, and what its role is in capacity building on equality and gender competencies for officials across Departments. This should include clarification of how GEO relates to the devolved administrations, respecting the integrity of devolution. This would include ensuring the effectiveness of the Gender Champions Network that currently appears to have a rather undefined structure, but which could assist in particular in sharing learning and good practice across the four nations in the context of increasingly diverging agendas.

It would be particularly helpful to ensure there is a network of equality officers across Departments who are supported by GEO to mainstream equality within their Department. A model for this is in place in Northern Ireland as a result of the Section 75 equality duties, with equality officers located within each Department. However, further development of such a model is required to ensure it is effective, particularly by ensuring that equality is a priority in policy making; evidence from Northern Ireland indicates that equality officers or functions in themselves do not create such a priority. Locating GEO within the Cabinet Office should in principle provide a basis for this, but it is important to ensure that GEO is appropriately resourced and linked into policy making processes at a sufficiently early stage, and also to ensure that staff within GEO have strong equality and gender competence and have opportunities to further strengthen this capacity.

From NIWEP's perspective, a clear relationship between GEO and Departments, as well as between GEO and the devolved administrations, is important to ensure a coherent and consistent approach to equalities across government. A clear relationship between the devolved administrations is similarly important to ensure dialogue across administrations, which is vital to enable sharing learning and ensure a shared basis for developing policy. For example, the Committee's Inquiry into the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals across the UK highlighted issues in Scotland and in Northern Ireland, notably abortion in Northern Ireland, leading to the Committee's further Inquiry in that matter which contributed to the developments that ultimately saw abortion decriminalised in Northern Ireland. This demonstrates that the UK wide application of CEDAW is also important. Implementation of the Abortion Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 remains incomplete, highlighting gaps in compliance UK wide. Alternatively, welfare reform with its significant impacts on women highlights an example where mitigating measures in respect of equality and gender were developed in the devolved administrations that can provide models for equality measures elsewhere.

NIWEP would urge for questions on the following issues to be integrated in any review of GEO and its role:

- What is the most relevant strategic structure for ensuring GEO can effectively fulfil its role?
- How does GEO link with Departmental policy making and what structures exist or can be put in place to support this?
- How can devolved administrations share evidence of their specific circumstances with GEO, and how can GEO act as a conduit for sharing evidence to inform effective policy making at central level?
- Specifically, how can GEO engage effectively with Treasury and the budget process to ensure positive equality impact in public spending?

Supporting compliance with international conventions: On the basis of experience at CSW, NIWEP believes that GEO has particular strengths in coordinating Government level participation in CSW and negotiating Agreed Conclusions. The UK has played an important role in safeguarding women's rights through this process, including advocating strong language on gender equality at the UN level, and it is important that this experience, knowledge and networks created is maintained and strengthened, particularly in the context of the new position of the UK as an independent negotiator outside the EU block.

NIWEP would urge for questions on the following issues to be integrated in any review of GEO and its role:

- How can GEO effectively fulfil its role in supporting compliance with international Conventions? What structures can support this at Departmental level?
- What arrangements could be put in place to strengthen GEO's role in supporting compliance with international conventions, specifically in ensuring all devolved administrations have a clear understanding of their obligations?

Role of GEO in COVID-19: NIWEP agrees with much of the analysis in the Committee's recent report on the economic impact of COVID-19 on women although NIWEP's work has focused on the devolved administration in Northern Ireland in this regard. NIWEP believes that governments across the UK, and in particular at the Northern Ireland level, have failed to recognise and act on the specific and disproportionate impact the pandemic has had on women, despite strong and ongoing advocacy from women's organisations highlighting clear evidence, in many cases from official government sources. NIWEP would welcome further investigation and clarification of the factors that led to this outcome, which NIWEP agrees is a significant missed opportunity.

NIWEP would urge for questions on the following issues to be integrated in any review of GEO and its role:

- How does GEO inform and support policy analysis and policy making at Departmental level? What structures can strengthen this?
- How do Departments share evidence with GEO, for supporting effective collaboration across government? How can this be strengthened?
- How can civil society engage with GEO systematically to ensure evidence from engagement with women is integrated in policy making?

Role of Women and Equalities Ministers: NIWEP would urge for a full time Women and Equalities Minister post to be instituted. This would enable greater focus to be given to equality issues within government, which in turn is critical for making equality a greater policy priority. A stronger priority for equality is urgent right now, in light of the deepening of inequalities that is a core impact of COVID-19 and will significantly increase poverty and disadvantage in the post COVID-19 period, if focused action is not taken. As noted for example in the recent letter by Fawcett Society and others following the Committee's COVID-19 inquiry¹, equality is not a luxury, but essential for sustainable recovery. A recovery plan focused on equality can, most importantly, protect the most vulnerable in society and prevent a major rise in poverty and destitution, but it can also generate new jobs and economic opportunities, which in turn help generate tax revenue and contribute to further economic development.

Preferably, the post should be at the level of cabinet minister, to maximise the impact on strategic policy and decision making. NIWEP believes that the dual Departmental approach, with further separation of roles between the Minister for Women and Equalities and the Minister for Equalities, does not support a focused, cross governmental approach, and may be a factor in the lack of focus on women and equalities in the COVID-19 response and recovery plans. This should be explored further.

¹ Fawcett Society and others 15 February 2021, '[Open letter to Prime Minister in response to Women and Equalities Committee Inquiry](#)'

NIWEP would urge for questions on the following issues to be integrated in any review of GEO and its role:

- What priority do the Minister for Equality and Minister for Women and Equalities give to this role?
- How does GEO inform and support Ministers and their advisers? What structures can strengthen this?
- How can Ministers' role be strengthened to ensure equality is given appropriate priority at Cabinet level?

New agenda for equality: NIWEP is deeply concerned about the proposed new agenda for equality as set out in the speech by the Minister for Women and Equalities, as it appears that it risks diluting the current equality agenda, that in turn is based on an analysis of the factors that underpin, create and perpetuate inequalities. As recognised in the Committee's Inquiry and highlighted throughout this response, the focus on equality in policy making across the UK is far from sufficient; however, the proposed new direction is not supported by evidence and risks contravening existing legislation, while in practice deepening the vulnerability of groups with protected characteristics to discrimination, harassment and inequality. It also takes the UK further from its international obligations as a State Party to international human rights instruments from CEDAW and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), as well as commitments made to ensure opportunities for healthy ageing.² NIWEP would urge the Committee to closely scrutinise the proposed new approach and take a proactive approach in highlighting issues and concerns arising from this with both the Government and Parliament.

NIWEP would urge for questions on the following issues to be integrated in any review of GEO and its role:

- What evidence base has been used for the proposed new policy? This must be published as a matter of priority.
- What measures or protections will be put in place to ensure there are no unintended consequences of the policy on people with protected characteristics?
- How can the role of GEO contribute to an understanding of the systemic nature and impacts of inequality, discrimination and disadvantage at government level?

² The [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) and [International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights](#) are also relevant

Comments on the Inquiry questions

NIWEP would like to make the following specific observations in relation to the questions raised within this Inquiry:

1. The structure and function of the GEO and its location in the Cabinet Office: how effectively does this enable it to support cross-departmental work on equalities, including the collection and analysis of equalities data?

NIWEP believes that a well functioning core coordination of equalities issues within Government is valuable, in ensuring access to the same evidence base, capacity building and expertise on the UK's international obligations across Departments. A single coordination can also ensure coherent, evidence based key messages and advice is available to Ministers across Government. For these reasons, NIWEP believes that GEO can fulfil a meaningful role and should be retained as the overarching lead function for equality, without breaking up functions or separating responsibility for different elements of equality legislation and policy across several units. The latter risks creating divergent, potentially even competing agendas, while diluting the overall focus on equality and strengthening equality for all population groups with protected characteristics.

However, NIWEP does agree with much of the analysis in the Committee's Inquiry into the gendered economic impact of COVID-19³ and would urge for the function of GEO to be reviewed and its role clarified as well as strengthened. NIWEP has some concern that the role of GEO in supporting strategic decision making may be relatively limited, while its reach across Departments is unclear, as are the mechanisms which GEO can employ to inform, advise on and monitor policy making. This is of significant concern from the perspective of gender equality, particularly as there is very limited gender expertise and capacity within individual Departments, with the exception of the FCDO, which has a primarily overseas focus. In practice, it is not clear what gender competence, evidence and capacity is available within and to Departments, and NIWEP is concerned that this exacerbates the limited focus on equality in general, and gender equality in particular, in recent policy. NIWEP highlighted the lack of gender disaggregated data as a major barrier to gender sensitive decision making in the response to the Committee's Inquiry referred to above, and would stress this as a critical issue associated with a lack of clearly defined, focused prioritisation of equality.

NIWEP would welcome a review of the role and function of GEO, but with a specific focus on the systems and processes required to ensure that a coordinating function can implement its role and carry out its functions effectively. Specifically, it would be helpful to clarify the role of GEO as adviser to Ministers across Cabinet, and how this role can be effectively strengthened to ensure Ministers have the evidence base required to adequately and appropriately prioritise action to implement equality duties, safeguard groups with protected characteristics and promote equity across population groups.

In addition, this should focus on reviewing mechanisms between GEO and individual Departments, to ensure there are mechanisms, structures and processes in place that enable GEO to effectively engage with each Department and support Departments to utilise evidence, capacity and learning shared. It would be particularly helpful to ensure there is a network of equality officers across Departments who are supported by GEO to mainstream equality within their Department. A model for this is in place in Northern Ireland as a result of the Section 75 equality duties, with equality officers located within each Department. However, further development of such a model is required to ensure it is effective, particularly by ensuring that

³ Women and Equalities Committee (February 2021) [Unequal impact? Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact: Fifth Report of Session 2019–21](#)

equality is a priority in policy making; evidence from Northern Ireland indicates that equality officers or functions in themselves do not create such a priority but must be effectively incorporated at the heart of structures and systems of policy development.

The review should also explore the structure and position of GEO within government. Locating GEO within the Cabinet Office appears appropriate in terms of ensuring a central location with effective links across Departments, but it is also important that GEO has a sufficiently strategic location within the Cabinet Office hierarchy to ensure that GEO can link into policy making processes at a sufficiently early stage and implement its role effectively. In addition, it is essential to ensure that GEO is appropriately resourced and also to ensure that staff within GEO have strong equality and gender competence and have opportunities to further strengthen this capacity.

As a Northern Ireland based organisation, NIWEP would in particular urge for any review of GEO to include clarification of how GEO relates to the devolved administrations and specifically to Northern Ireland given its different equality framework in devolution. Clear understanding and structures are essential to ensuring, *inter alia*, that public sector equality requirements are met. NIWEP understands that the Gender Champions Network remains in place, but currently appears to have a rather undefined structure, which does not support effective information and evidence sharing. NIWEP would welcome development of a clear structure for collaborative working which remains highly relevant in respect of sharing learning and good practice as well as ensuring an effective UK response to and engagement with international human rights bodies including CEDAW.

2. The GEO's role in supporting compliance with international obligations including the UN Conventions and Sustainable Development Goals;

NIWEP's engagement with GEO has primarily focused on international obligations, both through participation in CSW and through our role in coordinating the Northern Ireland civil society response to CEDAW. In light of this, NIWEP believes that the GEO's role is multi faceted and complex, but where its role engaging with UN in international level negotiations has been proactive, it is less clear how the function of supporting domestic compliance has been implemented.

NIWEP has had a positive experience working with GEO officials in relation to the UN Commission on the Status of Women conference. The approach of officials has been proactive and accommodating, and civil society has been able to engage positively with negotiations for Agreed Conclusions. NIWEP also believes that GEO as negotiator has advocated for gender equality, and has ensured that the UK position supports strong language on gender equality, including the rights of all women and girls. This has contributed to giving the UK a strong position internationally as an advocate for gender equality, and has also helped highlight UK approaches internationally, even if practice highlighted has primarily focused on UK work overseas. This positive international role is particularly important in the new context where the UK acts as an independent negotiator at the UN. NIWEP would urge for the role of GEO in this regard to be maintained, and if possible strengthened with appropriate capacity and resourcing. It should be noted that while GEO supports elected representatives attending CSW, the core responsibility for this, including preparation and capacity building, lies with the Inter Parliamentary Union as a separate entity.

With regard to supporting compliance with UN Conventions locally, it is from NIWEP's perspective less clear what the mechanisms for achieving this have been. NIWEP is familiar with the role of GEO in compiling periodic reports to the UN, and representing the UK at examinations under a number of the UN Conventions, including CEDAW. However, NIWEP understands that GEO has had less of a role for example in relation to reports under the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which highlights the lack of a clear, comprehensive role and clear mechanisms referred to under Q1.

NIWEP also believes that the role of GEO in engaging with Departments and others between periodic reports and supporting compliance as well as capacity building on Conventions needs to be clarified and could be strengthened. On the basis of representing Northern Ireland civil society at examinations of the UK under CEDAW, NIWEP believes that the most central role for GEO has been representing the views of Government and Departments internationally, with less of a role in building capacity with a view to implementing recommendations from UN Committees and strengthening compliance. It would be helpful to clarify whether this is a result of structures and procedures preventing effective ongoing engagement, or due to other issues.

NIWEP believes that the experience and knowledge held within GEO makes it a well positioned entity to work with both Ministers and Departments with regard to implementing UN recommendations and strengthening compliance with human rights Conventions. In addition, a central coordinating function such as GEO is also important in ensuring a shared understanding of the Conventions across Departments, while the international role of GEO can create an effective mechanism to share evidence and learning from international networks that can inform UK policy making and practice. However, to enable this, GEO must be located in a sufficiently strategic position within Government structures, appropriately resourced, and capable of attracting and retaining highly skilled staff, as emphasised under Q1. This requires commitment to equality and human rights as priorities for Government, and NIWEP would urge for this Inquiry to stress the importance of a comprehensive approach to equality, based on the international human rights framework and a strong understanding of intersectionality and mindful of Northern Ireland's equality framework.

3. The role of Minister for Women and Equalities: what does it mean for this to be a dual-departmental role? How robustly does it champion equalities across Government?

NIWEP shares the concerns raised by the Committee in the report of the Inquiry into the gendered economic impact of COVID-19⁴ regarding the role of Minister for Women and Equalities.

While a focus on women and on intersecting inequalities and the further separation of roles between the Minister for Women and Equalities and the Minister for Equalities may have practical merit, it is important to retain an intersectional lens to ensure that securing substantive equality is at the heart of government policy.

In particular, NIWEP shares the Committee's concern with regard to comments made by the Minister for Equalities in evidence to the Committee, which demonstrate an alarming lack of understanding of, and apparent lack of priority given to, equality issues. While NIWEP appreciates that the Minister may have responded primarily in the role as Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, this in itself is concerning, as it highlights an apparent lack of regard for the role of Minister for Equalities.

NIWEP would urge for further clarification of the context in which the Minister's comments were made, including the time allocated within the Minister's diary for the Minister for Equalities role and the training provided to Ministers taking on this role. In addition, clarification should be sought on what briefing is provided to the Minister by officials, and what capacity building on equality in general and gender equality in particular has been provided to the Department and officials advising the Minister. It is disappointing in itself that key information relevant to gender

⁴ Women and Equalities Committee (February 2021) [Unequal impact? Coronavirus and the gendered economic impact: Fifth Report of Session 2019–21](#)

equality, such as the proportion of women among those ineligible for SSP, was not provided to the Minister in preparation for her evidence to the Committee, and this appears to highlight the lack of gender competence within the Department and more widely within Government. Any further clarification or investigation could helpfully further explore the links between GEO and Departments, to provide a basis for identifying how gender competence can be strengthened in a systematic and coherent way.

While NIWEP welcomes the role of a Minister for Women, NIWEP believes that the dual Departmental approach does not support a focused, cross governmental approach, and may be a factor in the lack of focus on women and equalities in the COVID-19 response and recovery plans. As such, NIWEP does not agree with the view of the Women and Equalities Minister in her speech on 16 December 2020 that combining this post with another Ministerial role is a prerequisite for mainstreaming equality; rather, NIWEP believes that a focused role is important to ensure Ministers across Government are familiar with core equality and human rights issues relevant to their, and are able to take account of equality duties and needs within their specific remit.

NIWEP would urge for a full time Women and Equalities Minister post to be instituted. This would enable greater focus to be given to equality issues within government, which in turn is critical for making equality a greater policy priority. Preferably, the post should be at the level of Cabinet Minister and/or Secretary of State, to maximise the impact on strategic policy and decision making. The post should effectively be linked to the Cabinet Office as a central coordinating Department within Government.

Instituting a Secretary of State – or full time Minister - would also provide an opportunity to elevate the role of GEO to a central function supporting the Minister, which should be explored as a mechanism for ensuring the GEO's role to put equality at the heart of government can be implemented and discharged effectively. This would, in particular, create the context in which gender competence and other equalities competencies, including understanding of the Equality Act 2010, other equality legislation and frameworks in the UK and mechanisms for strengthening equality such as equality impact assessment, could gain greater priority and be strengthened across Government. It should be noted that equality impact assessment is an effective tool for developing, monitoring and evaluating policy, and should be viewed as such to maximise its impact.

A stronger priority for equality is urgent right now, in light of the deepening of inequalities that is a core impact of COVID-19 and will significantly increase poverty and disadvantage in the post COVID-19 period, if focused action is not taken. NIWEP would therefore stress that action is urgent and also that the importance of structures that enable prioritising equality cannot be overestimated.

4. The GEO's role in highlighting the numerous equalities issues which have been exacerbated by the pandemic

NIWEP agrees with much of the analysis in the Committee's report and agrees that the lack of engagement from GEO was a missed opportunity. However, as emphasised throughout this submission, NIWEP would welcome further investigation into the structures and mechanisms that determine how GEO engages with Departments and Ministers, along with clarification of decision making within GEO itself. It is evident that women were underrepresented and the needs of women and girls not addressed in the COVID-19 response across the UK administrations, with the possible exception of Scotland.

As noted in NIWEP's submission to the Inquiry, in Northern Ireland women have virtually no representation on COVID-19 taskforces, and a representative on a taskforce engaging with civil

society was secured only following significant pressure from the women's sector. Subsequently, a Feminist Recovery Plan was prepared by the women's sector setting out evidence of the impact on women and proposals for addressing the needs of women and girls. Responses from Departments secured through the Northern Ireland Assembly All Party Group on UNSCR 1325, Women, Peace and Security show a fundamental lack of gender competence, and demonstrate an almost complete lack of action focused on women's needs. These responses also indicate that equality in general, and gender equality in particular, is regarded as unimportant in the Northern Ireland context, which gives cause for questions regarding the general priority given to equality issues within the UK wide context. NIWEP believes that the role of GEO should be investigated against this context, with a view to identifying how Departments can have access to fuller data and evidence and greater gender competence in future COVID-19 response and post COVID-19 rebuilding of society and systems.

NIWEP understands that GEO capacity was reduced significantly at the start of the pandemic as staff were redeployed elsewhere within Government to assist with the COVID-19 response, and this should be taken into account when assessing GEO actions over the past year. Meanwhile, the decision to reduce capacity and the rationale for the decision should also be explored further. It is of concern that capacity was reduced at such a critical time, and even more concerning that it appears not to have been revisited as evidence of the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women began to become increasingly clear. NIWEP believes that this is symptomatic of the issues besetting the aim to 'put equality at the heart of government', and requires decisive action at political level to ensure the aim has concrete meaning. The impact of a lack of priority is evident in the Committee's findings, and the result is life opportunities, and in too many cases life itself, lost for women and girls across the UK.

5. The new approaches and initiatives which Minister for Women and Equalities Liz Truss set out in her speech at the Centre for Policy Studies on 16 December 2020

NIWEP is deeply concerned about the new direction proposed by the Minister in the December speech. It appears to suggest a radical departure from current policy and from the current focus on equality of outcome and groups with protected characteristics. It also appears to propose a focus on individuals, which fundamentally fails to understand the systemic nature of inequalities and the basic fact that people experience inequalities and discrimination due to characteristics they cannot control – such as sex, gender, race and disability status - rather than due to their personal attributes.

NIWEP is concerned that the proposed policy will deepen existing inequalities and set back current progress, while future attempts to address inequalities will be hampered by a limited understanding of the root causes and mechanisms of inequality. There is also a risk that an individualistic approach identifying those 'deserving' support will emerge, compounding the stigma experienced by others living with inequality and disadvantage. In addition, the proposal to focus on white working class communities risks in itself inflaming racial tensions in an already tense population, while removing attention from the wider socioeconomic and systemic factors that drive inequality in modern UK society. NIWEP would urge for the framing of any new policy to be based on concrete evidence and data based needs assessment, disaggregated by core equality characteristics and geography to ensure that initiatives can effectively address key documented issues. As noted above, equality is not a luxury, but a significant opportunity to create a prosperous society, with all population groups able to have confidence in and take control of their own lives.

As above, NIWEP, with other women's organisations, consistently highlight the need for better data collection and data breakdowns to support effective policy and decision making, and it is welcome that the Minister proposes a focus on data and research. However, it is in this very context disappointing that little to no evidence is presented to support the departure from current policy, and NIWEP is therefore concerned about the evidence base that will be used to

develop a future agenda. There is robust evidence why groups with the protected characteristics enshrined in equality legislation require specific attention with regarding to ensuring, safeguarding and promoting equality. In addition, as noted in the Committee's COVID-19 Inquiry reports, there is robust and extensive evidence on the specific inequalities of women, BAME groups and people with disabilities. People with several of these characteristics, furthermore, experience complex and intersecting inequalities, which are not adequately addressed by existing domestic legislation and or by the current international human rights framework. It is important to clarify how this existing evidence base will be utilised under the new proposals, and ensure that all future policy is in line with the UK's international obligations.

NIWEP would urge for further clarification of the rationale for the departure and publication of the evidence used to develop the new policy. It is also important to clearly set out the principles on which a new policy is based, including models and theoretical values; some of these are referenced in the Minister's speech, but full clarity is essential to ensure the very transparency the Minister is calling for in the speech and enable appropriate scrutiny of the proposals.

NIWEP would also urge for clarification of the proposal to remove focus on equality of outcome in favour of 'fixing the system'. It is not clear how this fits with current legislation and specifically the UK's international obligations under UN Conventions including CEDAW, CRPD and CERD, which are explicitly focused on creating equality of outcome. It is also not clear why such a change is necessary, as the focus of Conventions such as CEDAW is specifically on achieving equality of outcome by creating the legislative and policy framework and structures required to ensure equality for everyone. NIWEP believes it is critical that the UK adheres to its international obligations, particularly at present in its new role as an independent international agent. Above all, however, it is essential that policy is based on a genuine commitment to equity and equality. The speech does not provide reassurance that this is the case, and in this context it is vital to further scrutinise proposals to ensure the UK does not fall back on achieved progress in pursuit of opaque priorities.