

UK GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITY FOR RELIGION OR BELIEF

Background

The current machinery of government for the equality agenda is fragmented, complex and arguably incomplete. There have been some welcome changes in recent years – notably bringing together the Government Equalities Office, the Race Equality Unit and the Office for Disability Issues into the Equality Hub, and establishing a stable home for it within the Cabinet Office following multiple changes of department over previous years, in 2019; moving sponsorship of the Social Mobility Commission to the Equality Hub, in 2021; and rebranding the Equality Hub as the Office for Equality and Opportunity (OEO) to reflect a stronger focus on socio-economic inequalities and extending its ministerial team, in 2024. Details of the current OEO ministerial team and their responsibilities are at **Annex A**.

Current issues

While responsibility for the legal and institutional framework for equality, and for policy on women's equality, race equality, disability equality, LGB and trans equality (including legal gender recognition) and socio-economic equality, sit within the portfolio of the Minister for Women & Equalities and the OEO, other equality responsibilities and related matters sit elsewhere in government; OEO's role in relation to these is unclear. Longstanding issues highlighted in successive reports from the Women and Equalities Committee¹ and elsewhere remain:

- A pre-election commitment from Labour to appoint a dedicated full-time Secretary of State for Equalities has not been delivered.
- All the current OEO equality ministers, including the Secretary of State, have more than one role and must therefore divide their time and attention across different portfolios and departments.
- There are ministers for faith (not religion or belief) and children, but these sit in other departments and are not part of the OEO ministerial team. There is no minister for older people.
- Responsibility for human rights, which are intrinsically intertwined with approaches to equality, sits in the Ministry of Justice. Compliance with international human rights treaty obligations is spread across a number of departments and there is no central co-ordinating mechanism.
- Its responsibility for the Equality Act 2010 (EA2010) gives OEO some role coordinating equality issues across government. However, the fact that lead responsibility for some protected characteristic groups sits in other departments or does not exist at all creates barriers to a comprehensive and consistent cross-government approach to reducing equality, addressing intersectional issues and balancing competing rights.
- One of OEO's stated priorities is "ensuring equality and opportunity are embedded throughout the government's missions and work". However, there is no comprehensive government equality strategy or action plan, and no priority equality outcomes have been articulated to guide equality work across government or the wider public sector.

¹ See [The role of Minister for Women and Equalities and the place of GEO in government](#) [House of Commons, May 2018] and [Levelling Up and equality: a new framework for change](#) [House of Commons, September 2021]

- There is no formal ministerial or official-level mechanism for co-ordinating government policy or action on equality.
- The scrutiny remit of Parliament’s Women & Equalities Committee mirrors the portfolio of the Minister for Women & Equalities and the role of the OEO. Its ability to scrutinise cross-government policy and action across the whole equality agenda is therefore constrained.
- The fragmented nature of departmental responsibilities for different aspects of the equality agenda means that stakeholder engagement is often siloed, reducing the opportunity for dialogue between those with different perspectives.

Ministerial responsibility for religion or belief equality

As noted above, currently no government minister or department has specific responsibility for religion or belief equality. The Minister for Women & Equalities and OEO are responsible for “overview of the overarching equalities legislative framework”, which includes the EA2010 provisions protecting people from discrimination and harassment and requiring public bodies to advance equality for religion or belief groups, but not for cross-government policy on religion or belief equality. The Ministry of Justice is responsible for the domestic human rights framework, including the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion and the right to freedom from discrimination on grounds of religion or belief in the enjoyment of the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights, but not for the realisation of these rights in practice.

Ministerial responsibility for “faith” sits with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). The role of Minister for Devolution, Faith and Communities (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State) is currently held by Miatta Fahnbulleh MP. She is responsible for:

- English devolution
- Mayoral Combined Authorities and pan-regional bodies
- Local and regional growth and investment
- Investment zones and freeports
- High streets and towns
- Communities and social cohesion
- Faith

A search of recent MHCLG publications suggests that the focus of attention under the “faith” part of this portfolio has been on community cohesion and resilience, some targeted action to combat antisemitism, and work to develop a definition of anti-Muslim hostility. There is nothing to indicate any work focussed on non-religious philosophical beliefs, such as Humanism or the belief that sex is immutable, or on those with no religion. Nor is there evidence of programmes to tackle documented inequalities and disadvantages experienced by different religion or belief groups, such as poorer higher educational outcomes for Christians and Muslims, low labour market participation and pay gaps experienced by Muslims,² increased rates of recorded religious hate crime, or inequalities in legal recognition of religious and belief-based marriage ceremonies³.

This contrasts with the position in relation to other protected characteristics for which OEO ministers have responsibility. For example, a [Race Equality Engagement Group](#) was established in March 2025 to inform the government’s work to tackle race inequality, including in access to financial services, policing and health. In July 2021, the previous

² See [Equality and Human Rights Monitor](#) [Equality and Human Rights Commission, November 2023]

³ See [Celebrating Marriage: A New Weddings Law](#) [Law Commission, July 2022]

government launched a cross-government [National Disability Strategy](#) to address the barriers disabled people face in employment, education, healthcare and public services.

The absence of clear political leadership for religion or belief equality has resulted in a policy and delivery gap, with no concerted cross-government action to reduce the known barriers and inequalities experienced by religion or belief groups. It also risks insufficient focus on ensuring an equality-informed approach to policy areas led by various government departments; for example, policy on identity-based violence, public order and hate crime is led by the Home Office and whereas there is an equality-informed approach to tackling violence against women and girls due to formal partnership working between Home Office and OEO ministers, the approach to hate crime has been more fragmented, as noted by the Law Commission in 2021.⁴

There is no record of any formal reporting, accountability or working relationship between the minister for faith and the OEO ministerial team.

Arguments for and against creating a minister for religion or belief equality within OEO

Equality and social justice organisations generally support the idea of bringing all equality issues covered by the EA2010 within the portfolio of the Minister for Women & Equalities. In 2024, the Fairness Foundation published a report⁵ making the case for a dedicated Secretary of State focussed on fairness, equality and opportunity for all protected characteristics, including religion or belief. It argued that this would provide the opportunity to reframe perceptions of equality and human rights as shared values for a fairer society, enable intersectional forms of inequality to be better-understood and more effectively tackled, and provide the basis for a consistent and coherent approach to prioritisation and balancing competing rights.

Other benefits of bringing all aspects of equality, including religion or belief, within the portfolio of the Minister for Women & Equalities include:

- The ability to manage competing rights together – a single controlling mind.
- The need for centrally located leadership with power to drive action in departments across government.

There may be a case for differentiating between ministerial responsibility for equality and human rights matters relating to religion or belief and the broader faith engagement and community cohesion agenda, which currently sits in MHCLG. The Covid-19 pandemic illustrated the importance of faith communities having clear channels of engagement with government about services for and within different communities; there could be advantages in keeping these distinct from a specific government focus on protection from religion or belief discrimination and broader human rights and equality work.

Conclusion and recommendations

Responsibility for policy on religion or belief equality is a clear gap in the current machinery of government. As set out under “**Current issues**” above, this gap gives rise to a number of longstanding policy, delivery and accountability concerns. It risks a lack of government focus on, and capability to address, the discrimination, inequalities and disadvantages experienced by different religion or belief communities, in terms both of legal rights (such

⁴ [Hate crime laws: final report](#) [Law Commission, December 2021]

⁵ [Deepening the Opportunity Mission](#) [Fairness Foundation, July 2024]

as disparities in the treatment in law of people from different religious and belief communities in relation to discrimination and harassment, hate crime and marriage) and of outcomes (such as in housing, health, education, employment and average pay, levels of material deprivation and criminal justice). It also creates barriers to the ability of government to take a coherent and consistent approach to balancing competing rights and addressing intersectional issues, thereby impacting negatively on the response to issues facing other protected characteristic groups such as women, ethnic minority communities, LGB and trans people and disabled people. The most contested balance of rights issues emerging in recent years have involved strongly held religious or philosophical beliefs – for example, marriage of same-sex couples, protests around the conflict in Gaza and gender critical beliefs. The lack of appropriate government machinery to balance competing rights therefore impacts disproportionately on religion or belief groups.

The most effective solution would be to make **significant machinery of government changes**, specifically:

- Appointing a full-time dedicated Secretary of State for Equality & Opportunity, located in the Cabinet Office with the OEO team of officials. This portfolio should cover:
 - all equality protected characteristics
 - socio-economic equality and social mobility
 - human rights.
- Broadening a junior ministerial role to have explicit responsibility for religion or belief equality. This role could sit either in the Cabinet Office or be attached to the existing minister for faith role in MHCLG, but it should be part of the OEO ministerial team and the equality aspect of the role should be accountable to the Secretary for State for Equality & Opportunity.
- The Secretary of State for Equality & Opportunity and the OEO should have responsibility for:
 - government strategy and policy on fairness, equality and opportunity, including balancing competing rights
 - the legal framework protecting equality and human rights
 - driving and supporting cross-government delivery of equality and human rights commitments
 - developing and delivering specific equality interventions
 - the equality data landscape
 - developing and supporting delivery of a cross-government framework for stakeholder and public engagement
 - sponsorship of the Equality and Human Rights Commission and the Social Mobility Commission.

However, given the current political climate, such a significant change seems unlikely in the foreseeable future. Large machinery of government changes are often seen as undesirable as they can create instability, disruption, delay and cost. The statutory limit on the number of ministerial appointments is also a constraining factor. Nonetheless, it is recommended that a machinery of government change of this nature should be the long-term aim.

To improve the position in the shorter-term, there are some more minor portfolio, governance and accountability changes that could be made. There should be a concerted low-key campaign – if possible, involving a wide range of religion or belief organisations – to encourage the government to:

- **Expand the Minister for Equalities role currently held by Seema Malhotra MP to include responsibility for religion or belief equality**, with appropriate staff support in OEO. This would require close working and co-ordination with the minister for faith

role in MHCLG, but would have the advantage of bringing religion or belief equality firmly within the scrutiny of the Women & Equalities Committee.

- **Develop a cross-government equality strategy** covering all the EA2010 protected characteristics, including religion or belief, led by the Minister for Women & Equalities and OEO and with clear objectives and indicators.
- Create an **Equality and Opportunity Cabinet sub-committee**, chaired by the Minister for Women & Equalities, to drive, monitor and hold ministers to account for delivery of the government's equality strategy. Membership should be drawn from departments responsible for key policy areas within the strategy – in relation to religion or belief this would include housing and community cohesion, education, employment, health, criminal justice and human rights.
- Alternatively (if a Cabinet sub-committee is not achievable), establish an **Inter-Ministerial Group on Equality and Opportunity** with similar membership and functions.
- Create an official-level **Inter-Departmental Group on Equality and Opportunity** drawn from departments responsible for key policy areas within the equality strategy, to oversee and co-ordinate delivery. This group should draw in and engage with relevant sector and religion or belief community representatives.
- Work with the Office for National Statistics and the UK Statistics Authority to deliver improvements in **national data on religion and belief**, including data on identity, attitudes, experiences and outcomes. This should include resolving difficulties arising from differences in the way some religions are treated in data collection compared to their treatment as ethnicities in the EA2010.
- Establish improved mechanisms and fora for **government engagement** with religion and belief organisations and to enable dialogue between them and with organisations representing other protected characteristic groups with competing rights.

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OEO MINISTERIAL TEAM

Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women & Equalities (split role with DfE) – Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP. She has responsibility for:

- promoting equality of opportunity for everyone, and reducing negative disparities
- strategic oversight of the government’s equality policy, for women, ethnicity, disability and LGBT+
- overall sponsorship of the Social Mobility Commission and Equality and Human Rights Commission
- overview of the overarching equalities legislative framework.

Minister of State (Minister for Women & Equalities) - Rt Hon Baroness Smith of Malvern (split role with DfE and DWP – Minister for Skills). Her responsibilities include:

- lead policy responsibility for gender equality and women’s rights
- sponsorship of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) and Social Mobility Commission (SMC)
- UK equality framework (including the Equality Act)
- equality data and analysis

She also has lead responsibility in the House of Lords on the following policy areas:

- socioeconomic opportunity
- race and ethnicity policy
- Employment Rights Bill (Department for Business and Trade lead)

Minister of State (Minister for Social Security and Disability) (split role with DWP) – Rt Hon Sir Stephen Timms MP. He is responsible for:

- Disability policy and x-Gov responsibility for disabled people
- Health and disability reform
- Universal Credit and Legacy Benefits Delivery
- Contributory Benefits, Personal Independence Payment (PIP), Disability Living Allowance (DLA), and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)
- Carer’s Allowance (CA)
- Housing
- Access to Work
- ALB: Health and Safety Executive
- Serious Case Panel
- Uprating and Benefit Cap
- Oversight of Disability Unit (DU)

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Minister for Equalities) (split role with DfE and FCDO) - Seema Malhotra MP. She is responsible for:

- race and ethnicity policy
- ministerial sponsor of the [Race Equality Engagement Group](#)
- women’s equality policy, including pay gap reporting, equal pay and pay transparency
- lead minister for the Equality (Race and Disability) Bill

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (Minister for Equalities) (split role with DfE – Early Education) – Olivia Bailey MP. Her responsibilities include:

- LGBT+ legislation including on conversion practices
- LGBT+ policy