



Joint Committee on Human Rights

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From Rt Hon Harriet Harman MP, Chair

Rt Hon Justine Greening MP
Minister for Women and Equalities
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT

14 September 2016

Dear Justine,

The Joint Committee on Human Rights has received the attached letter dated 5 September from a group of NGOs, expressing concern at reports that the Government Equalities Office has awarded the contract for future delivery of the Equality Advisory Support Service (EASS) to the firm G4S.

The Committee would be grateful to receive a memorandum from your Department setting out the background to the award of this contract. In particular, the memorandum should set out all relevant information on the timetable and tendering process for the contract, the criteria against which applicants were assessed, the results of the process, and what steps the Government is taking to ensure that the EASS operates an accessible, confidence-building helpline service. The memorandum should also address the specific issues raised in the NGOs' letter to us of 5 September.

It would be very helpful to receive this memorandum by not later than Monday 10 October.

I am copying this letter to G4S.

Yours sincerely,

Rt Hon Harriet Harman
Chair of the Joint Committee on Human Rights

Embargoed until 00:01 on Tuesday 6 September 2016

Rt Hon Harriet Harman QC MP
Chair
Joint Committee on Human Rights
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

Rt Hon Maria Miller
Chair
Select Committee on Women & Equalities
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

5th September 2016

Dear Chair,

Award of the Equality Advisory Support Service to G4S

We are writing to express our profound concern at reportsⁱ that the Government Equalities Office has awarded security firm G4S the contract to deliver the Equality Advisory Support Service (EASS). Given the serious and longstanding concerns about the competence of G4S expressed by Members of Parliament across the House and several parliamentary committees, we urge you to initiate a parliamentary investigation into both the tendering process and the suitability of G4S to deliver this vital service. We understand that the service is due to become operational on 1 October and run for three years, with the option of a two year extension. The matter is therefore urgent.

The EASS provides advice and assistance to individuals on issues relating to equality and human rights, across England, Scotland and Wales. In October 2012, it replaced a helpline, previously run by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), which provided a vital resource for individuals affected by discrimination.

In a March 2016 report, the House of Lords Select Committee on the Equality Act 2010 and Disabilityⁱⁱ recommended that the EASS either be returned to the EHRC or managed by the EHRC. In its response to the report, the EHRC strongly supported the recommendation that the EASS be returned to its control and asked the Government whether it could run the EASS or manage it. In its response to the report the Government rejected this recommendation, apparently without explanation.

The 2016 tendering process for the service lacked openness and the procurement specification – which was only discovered after an extensive search – appears to have been seriously flawed, with important requirements identified as “essential” in 2011 either

downgraded or now removed entirely from the specified service requirements. The specification does not require a contractor to have any relevant knowledge or prior skills, abilities, experience or track record in delivering equalities or human rights advice. It also fails to address concerns raised with the House of Lords Select Committee or to set out what is required to deliver the contract to what ought to be the required high standard.

We support the House of Lords Select Committee recommendations that the EASS be returned to the EHRC and/or be managed by the EHRC. As the specialist national body charged with advancing equality and human rights, it is clearly best placed to provide advice and guidance to those who believe their rights, dignity and equal worth may have been violated.

By contrast, G4S is one the world's largest security employers. It has earned a reputation for serious, systemic mismanagement and discrimination. It has been responsible for serious human rights violations against those within its care, including at youth detention centres, adult prisons, immigration centres and during removals. We suggest that it is manifestly ill-equipped to provide advice on discrimination and human rights. We suggest that members of the public are unlikely to have confidence in an advice service operated by G4S.

We enclose a dossier which brings together the many serious allegations and findings against G4S. These include the systemic failings which contributed to the unlawful killing of Jimmy Mubenga by G4S staff, the repeated inspection findings of racism and sexism among G4S staff and harrowing official reports of G4S mistreatment of children, pregnant women, and other protected groups.

Reports of a G4S-run helpline have been met with widespread public consternation. A 'SumOfUs' petition urging the Secretary of State for Education, Women and Equalities not to hand over the service to G4S and instead hand responsibility back to the EHRC, has already received over 51,000 signatures.

At a time when reports of hate crime in the UK have surged and recent EHRC reports have highlighted entrenched discrimination in British society we can ill-afford G4S involvement in the provision of discrimination advice. We hope your Committee – or one of your counterpart Committees – may be in a position to urgently carry out this scrutiny. In the meantime, we ask that the award of the contract be placed on hold with immediate effect.

Yours sincerely,

Action and Rights of Disabled People in Newham

Advice Services Alliance

Bail for Immigration Detainees

Detention Action

Disability Advice Service Lambeth

Discrimination Law Association
Enfield Disability Action
Enfield LGBT Network
Enfield Women's Centre
Equal Lives
Faith Matters
Friends, Families and Travellers
Greenwich Association of Disabled People
Inclusion London
INQUEST
Institute of Race Relations
Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants
JUST West Yorkshire
Kingston Visual Impairment Parliament
Law Centres Network
Legal Aid Practitioners Group
LGBT Consortium
Liberty
London Autistic Rights Movement
Merton Centre for Independent Living
Operation Black Vote
Prisoners' Advice Service
Race Equality Foundation
Race Equality Matters
Race on the Agenda
Redbridge Concern for Mental Health
Rights Watch UK
Ruils

Safety 4 Sisters

Sisters of Frida

SumOfUs

Tell MAMA

The Howard League for Penal Reform

The Runnymede Trust

Women for Refugee Women

Women's Resource Centre

Cc: Meg Hillier MP, Chair, Select Committee on Public Accounts; Rt Hon Keith Vaz MP, Chair, Home Affairs Select Committee

ⁱ BuzzFeed, *G4S To Take Over Running Of Government Discrimination Helpline*, 26 July 2016. Available at: https://www.buzzfeed.com/alanwhite/exclusive-g4s-to-take-over-vital-government-discrimination-s?utm_term=.hly85o6Me#.ymkkGZpJ3. Access All Areas, *G4S TO RUN GOVERNMENT DISCRIMINATION HELPLINE*, 27 July 2016. Available at: <http://www.accessaa.co.uk/g4s-to-run-government-discrimination-helpline/>.

ⁱⁱ The Equality Act 2010: The Impact on Disabled People. Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/equality-act-2010-and-disability/news-parliament-2015/equality-act-report-published/>