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| **EVELYN COLLINS – Opening** |
| **EQUINET 10th ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE**  **Together for an equal Europe** |
| **Tuesday 10 October 2017** |
| **LOCATION: Les Brigittines**  [**Petite rue des Brigittines, 1000 Brussels, Belgium**](https://goo.gl/maps/jNPp8BWF6iH2) |

**Opening Remarks: 10.30 – 11.00**

* On behalf of Equinet, I am delighted to warmly welcome all of you here today. This is an important moment for Equinet, we are proud to celebrate our 10th anniversary and the achievements we have secured, together with our members and partner organisations. We are pleased with the level of interest shown in this conference, on the theme **Together for an Equal Europe**, and honoured by the number of high level speakers and distinguished guests that have accepted our invitation to join us. This includes many people directly involved in establishing the network, some from the very beginning, whom we will have opportunity to introduce later today.
* Working for an equal Europe is what motivates us in equality bodies, wherever we are located – a Europe where equality, non-discrimination and respect for human rights and the rule of law underpin the actions of Governments, of institutions and of people generally, where diversity is valued and celebrated and where social inclusion not exclusion is the norm.
* Equinet’s vision is of a Europe where full equality in practice is achieved across grounds such as gender and gender identify, religion or belief, racial or ethnic origin, age, sexual orientation and disability and where discrimination on such grounds is eliminated. It promotes equality in Europe through supporting and enabling the work of national equality bodies.
* Equality bodies have a crucial role in challenging discrimination and promoting equality across Europe. Equality bodies are champions for

the core EU value of equality and we are defenders of the right to non-discrimination. When we provide assistance to people who have been discriminated against, we affirm the basic standards of equal treatment. When we support good practice in policy making, employment and service provision, we enable diversity to be celebrated and accommodated. When we engage in awareness raising we promote equality as a core value across society. Equality bodies are necessary and valuable agents of social change.

* The fact that we have a full house today is testament to the valuable work Equinet, as the European network of equality bodies, has done over the past 10 years. Your presence encourages us to continue our work, to build the capacity of our members, to ensure effective peer support among members and to provide a platform for identifying and communicating policy lessons arising from our work. We appreciate very much the support of the European Commission in funding the work of the Network since it was established in 2007, enabling our now 46 members in 34 countries to learn from each other and to share their perspectives on implementing EU equality law and policy in order to contribute to the European equality agenda.
* With this conference we want not only to celebrate Equinet and its achievements in the past 10 years, but also to discuss – with you as key actors from across a range of sectors – what needs to be done now to advance equality across Europe in today’s changing, complex and sometimes hostile environment.

* As I said, equality is a core value of the European Union and indeed the wider European region. We want a Europe that creates and sustains a strong infrastructure of law, institutions and policies that enables the vision of an equal Europe to be realised. Equality as a core value is reflected not only in our common constitutional traditions, but also in the EU Treaties and the Charter of Fundamental Rights
* European Union equal treatment legislation was created to reflect this core value of equality by ensuring the related basic principle of equal treatment. The adoption of the various equality Directives by the EU has had significant and positive impact on people’s right to non-discrimination, going back to the 1970s, particularly in the field of employment over the years but also in respect of goods and services on grounds of race/ethnicity and gender. A strong and comprehensive legal framework is needed to support progress towards an equal Europe. The need for adoption of the horizontal directive to prohibit discrimination on the grounds of religion and belief, age, disability and sexual orientation outside employment remains clear, it would add to the protections available, help create a common framework across the EU and provide an important signal on the importance of equality in Europe. We remain very supportive of the Commission’s efforts in this regard.
* Strong and effective institutions are vital too – we are all aware that in order to comply with the requirements of the Racial Equality Directive 2000, and the later Gender Directives, Member States had to establish or designate an existing equality body to carry out the functions set out in the legislation, to provide independent assistance to victims of discrimination; to conduct independent surveys and reports concerning discrimination, and to make recommendations on discrimination issues
* Equality bodies now exist in all Member States of the European Union – there is quite a variety of models and significant diversity in terms of their size, their mandate, the grounds they cover, their structures, experience and history but essentially equality bodies play a vital role in promoting respect for the principle of equal treatment, they are public institutions promoting equality and fighting discrimination, independent from government.

The content of the Directives showed the clear and important recognition by the EU that equality bodies play a key role in securing greater equality for people across the EU and there is no doubt that we have come a long way since the 2000 Directive. Equality bodies have established themselves as key institutions in the national equality infrastructure and have contributed to securing important advances, they are acknowledged at the European and international level as key actors playing a vital role in challenging discrimination and championing the value of equality across Europe, in securing the effective and better implementation of the EU non-discrimination legal framework, in turning rights on paper into practice, and making equal treatment legislation work on the ground.

* Equality bodies are watchdogs, guardians, expert institutions and champions for equality, all at once.
* However, we have to acknowledge that some equality bodies work in very difficult circumstances. Some lack a wide and strong mandate with sufficient powers to implement all of their functions to a scale and a standard that can achieve an impact.
* Others face a critical shortage of financial and staff resources. Some equality bodies are subject to political interference with their work, severely undermining their independence.
* Some are the subject of hostile commentary, arising from support for particular cases or championing policy positions on particular grounds such as sexual orientation – including from senior politicians. This reinforces the need for equality bodies to implement their powers and duties independently, without fear or favour.
* Equinet has called for standards for equality bodies to be established, beyond the minimum standards referenced in the EU Directives, to ensure that equality bodies are able to fulfil their potential to a scale that can achieve real impact. Last year we produced a Working Paper on this, with wide engagement across the Network, which sets out what such standards should cover, including issues of mandate, independence and effectiveness and we are promoting this at EU level
* We believe that common standards for equality bodies have the potential to contribute to the effective enforcement of EU equal treatment legislation. They can also support the strengthening of the rule of law and put an emphasis on the independence and effectiveness of the equality infrastructure, of which equality bodies are an important element.
* And this is critically important because champions for equality are much needed today. Current developments and challenges to equality in today’s Europe oblige us to find new and effective approaches to supporting equality as a value and achieving equality as a goal.
* We live in a Europe with growing levels of diversity. In parallel to the increasing acknowledgment of this diversity as an asset and benefit, we are also faced with hostility to diversity in wide sectors of our societies.
* We are all challenged by the rise of hate speech and extremism; by austerity measures and budget cuts; by the persistence of inequalities across the grounds, many of which are exacerbated by poverty and social exclusion; by political pressures; by a shrinking space for fundamental rights, with sometimes negative public discourse on

equality and human rights, discourse that prizes the values of financial prudence, security and national traditions over the values of equality and diversity.The European Union is challenged to re-engage with its core value of equality in forging a new vision for the Europe of the future.

* These are challenges that we are all grappling with; they are challenges that we can best tackle successfully if we work together. Working to advance equality is as critical as ever if we are to drive well-being and participation for all groups in our societies and maximise the potential of a Europe characterised by equality and diversity. This demands our urgent ambition and creativity and I look forward to today’s discussions for ideas and inspiration on working together for an equal Europe.
* Thank you.