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Dissecting the News: a multimodal analysis of the UK broadsheets

MA thesis

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Abstract

As news media outlets increasingly adopt a visually centric approach in their articles (Alonso et al., 2013: 370), previous media discourse research has primarily focused on identifying the visual or textual component, while some studies have combined both to conduct a multimodal analysis. Despite the scholarly interest in multimodal analysis of the news media outlets, to the best of my knowledge, there is a lack of research that not only compares language use and visual elements in news media articles but also examines the most prominent broadsheets in the UK to grasp a more globalised view of the projection of the UK news. Thus, the present study aims to analyse the texts and visuals of the political news articles and compare language density and cohesion with image usage published in three of the most widely read UK newspapers: *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, and *The Times*. To achieve this goal, a manually compiled corpus of 90 articles, 30 per each broadsheet, totaling 65,217 words and 127 embedded images, is analysed using two prominent frameworks. The linguistic variation of the chosen articles is examined using Douglas Biber's (1988) *Multidimensional Analysis*, which comprises comparison across 6 parameters: 1) informational, 2) narration, 3) explicitness, 4) persuasion, 5) abstractions, and 6) elaboration. Meanwhile the images in the selected corpus are interpreted through the social semiotic framework as outlined by Kress & van Leeuwen's (2006) *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, specifically focusing on representational, interactive and compositional meanings. Once this quantitative, qualitative and analytical research has been carried out, the results of the study revealed that the three broadsheets share their journalistic strategies, especially when considering informational density, syntactic elaboration, and explicit reference; however, there are some differences found in narrative structure, persuasive expression, and abstractness. Moreover, the usage of visuals across the broadsheets reveals some differences. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the core elements of news articles and the techniques currently employed in news reporting in the UK, thereby creating greater awareness of the reliability of the news people encounter daily.

Introduction

Traditional news media has experienced significant transformations influenced by increased social media usage and overall mobile technology. These technological advances have given rise to visually driven platforms, where images, videos, and other visual elements have become significant (Alonso et al., 2013: 370). As the technological revolution has become a central area of the current world and the old ways are being replaced with the new ones, researchers have been captivated by the field as well. There are a few research areas that gained attention in this field, one of the more prominent ones being the analysis of the visual communication and design (Wang, 2014; Romney & Johnson, 2018), as the platforms are centred around the visuals. The scholars have also been approaching the language component as text is inevitable in the news media, and some of the areas that have been analysed are linguistic and register variation (Xiao, 2009; Titak & Roberson, 2013). Some scholars have combined the means of communication and focused on multimodality in the news media (Wozniak et al., 2014; Richardson & Stanyer, 2011; Johnson et al., 2003). Besides multimodality, the content of the news has also been analysed, more particularly, the media representation and coverage, including gender positioning, minorities, and specific social groups (under)representation, and biased news (Richardson, 2001; Crossman et al., 2007; Bingham, 2012). This further enhances the current field towards newsworthiness research (Boukes, Jones, and Vliegenthart, 2020, Spangher et al. 2023, Siravuri and Alhoori, 2018). As the news-worthy readings are analysed, audience engagement has to be studied, so reader participation has also been under attention (Richardson & Stanyer, 2011; Brossard & Shanahan, 2006). Hence, the news media has proven to be a resourceful soil for scholarly work, including the areas of visual, textual, multimodal, representational, newsworthiness and audience engagement fields.

As mentioned above, one of the significant areas of the current research field is multimodality. The term refers to the multiple means of making the meaning (Jewitt, Bezemer, O'Halloran, 2016: 2) and can be further subdivided into three key premises. According to the authors, the first one is concerned with the meaning-making through the means of semiotic resources, offering various opportunities and limitations. The second premise of the meaning-making is the production of 'multimodal wholes' (ibid.). The third premise is that to understand the meaning of a unit, one ought to consider all of the semiotic resources to get a broader understanding of the aforementioned unit. Lastly, the authors note

the scholarly research within the field uses a variety of terms to refer to this concept, such as *multimodal communication*, *multimodal discourse*, or *multimodal interaction*. Although the term multimodality is, as it can be seen, rather broad, the current study employs the term multimodality, as defined by the authors, means of making the meaning through various semiotic resources produced through multimodal wholes, more specifically focusing on the produced text and the visuals included in the text.

Alongside the theoretical approach to multimodality, the researchers have been focusing on various practical applications. Several angles have been taken upon the broadsheets and the variety of means of communication within the articles. Previous research has explored the relationship between language and visual elements in media discourse. Studies have examined how multimodal communication, the combination of text and images, shapes the meaning-making process. For example, Schubert (2021) shows that text-visual combinations in political advertisements enhance the persuasive power of the message, underscoring the importance of visual elements in conjunction with language. Additionally, Bednarek and Caple (2014) note that the construction of newsworthiness in journalism increasingly relies on both linguistic and visual resources, which work together to present events as more significant or spectacular than they may be. The significance of the storyline is often determined by the features as headlines, evaluative language, lead paragraphs, some other elements, like visuals or the general layout can also be efficient in embracing the story. Thus, the correlation between text and visual becomes increasingly important.

Another inevitable and intertwined term under the analysis has been *newsworthiness*. The term refers to the quality of an event that makes it worthy of reporting. As it has been argued, events are to become news once they match certain values that are: frequency, threshold, unambiguity, meaningfulness, consonance, unexpectedness, continuity, and composition (Galtung and Ruge, 1965). The quality of newsworthiness is not the fixed quality of the event but rather its ability to match the aforementioned values (ibid.). The more values are matched, the more likely the event is to be reported and thus grasp the attention of the audience. Since the term was coined, it, naturally, has been adapted. For instance, Harcup and O'Neill (2001) proposed a new set of values based on their study of the British newspapers. The values include: the power elite, celebrity, entertainment, surprise, negative news, stories with positive outcomes, magnitude, meaning the scale or number of people affected, relevance, follow-up stories, and newspaper agenda, which means the stories that fit the

publisher's goals. Lastly, the authors emphasise the shift in the news as it not only aims to inform but also to entertain the public, thus their proposed set of values reflects the shifting attitude. The newsworthiness, hence, refers to the set of values that an event matches for it to be reported on a media outlet.

Keeping in mind the term of newsworthiness, it could be stated that many events could qualify to be reported on, however, despite making it to the front pages does not necessarily mean the unbiased and proper coverage. It has been analysed that although the events make it to the ages, certain groups get underrepresented. For example, when considering the articles found under the sports section, it is noted that the pictures of male players are more widely used compared to female athletes (Vincent et al. 2004), moreover, the sportswomen are highly underrepresented in the articles overall (Bingham 2012). Of course, this is not limited to gender or sports-related matters but also minority communities. For instance, the British Muslim community has been noticed to be largely underrepresented and more so, if present, to be reported in predominantly negative contexts (Richardson 2009). Thus, news values may shed light onto the event, yet the way the readers will perceive the news largely depends on the framing of the information.

One of the key means of framing information within a text is language, so inevitably, the language aspect has to be considered as well. The language component has been tackled through various perspectives, one of which is the grammatical, for example, a synchronic and diachronic analysis of the registers across English and non-Western languages has been done (Xiao, 2009). Further on, register variation has been a focus of research across various languages (Nunnally & Biber, 1999), building upon Biber's multidimensional framework which consists of 6 dimensions (informational production, narration, explicitness, persuasion, abstraction and elaboration). Furthermore, Latif and Chaudry (2016) have examined shifts in language style in sports reporting. Their study reveals that the language shifts towards less formal and more conversational, also, that the reports are more reader-centred as they are involved in the text. However, their focus remains primarily on language use without considering how visual elements might complement or challenge these linguistic shifts. Similarly, Huang and Ren (2020) reveal that the editorial language style varies based on cultural context. As the study suggests, the *China Daily* editorial has the tendency to be more informational, impersonal and has a stronger institutional voice while The New York Times is focused more on reader engagement, narration, argumentation with a stronger authorial

stance. Yet, their work does not fully account for the integration of visual elements in these editorial practices. Thus, the language as the primary means of transmitting the message remains the key component in determining the underlying messages within the articles.

The previous studies show that visuals enhance persuasion, contribute to newsworthiness, and create accessibility while the language density affects the overall style of the chosen discourse. Despite this growing interest in multimodal analysis, there is a lack of research on the specific relationship between language dimensions and image use. While previous studies have explored the role of visuals in news content, there is limited research on the cohesion between text and images in the news outlets across media. So, the current thesis compares dimensions of language and meanings constructed through image usage in three of the UK's most-read online newspapers: *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, and *The Times*. The research aims to determine how visual and textual data are correlating within the article. Specifically, the following research questions are raised:

1. What linguistic variety is used across the UK broadsheets?
2. To what extent does the linguistic variety differ in the chosen outlets?
3. What features are used in the visuals of the analysed articles?

To answer these research questions, this paper uses a multimodal approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse the relationship between text and visuals. The results of this thesis will provide new insights into how online newspapers adapt their content to the visual-centric demands of the current era.

The thesis is structured in the following way: firstly, the explanation of the methods used in the study is provided alongside the two frameworks analysed. After data and methods section, the results and discussion of the current research are presented, lastly, the thesis is concluded with some insights for the future analyses.

2. Data and Methods

To answer the raised research questions, the qualitative and quantitative contrastive approach has been chosen and, accordingly, the analysis of the current study has been based on a manually compiled corpus containing 150 news articles gathered from three major UK broadsheets: *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, and *The Times*. This section further explains the following: the selection of the materials (1), specifically the selection of broadsheets and articles; the compilation of the corpus (2); the theoretical frameworks used for the analysis (Biber's *Multidimensional Model* (3.1) and Kress & van Leeuwen's *Grammar of Visual Design* (3.1)); the process of the analysis.

2.1. Selection of the Materials

As already mentioned, three of the UK broadsheets have been chosen for the analysis. The decision to analyse language usage across *The Guardian*, *The Times*, and *Independent.co.uk* is, firstly, based on their prominent online visibility, all of the broadsheets are placed within 10 most-visited news websites in the UK. *The Guardian* stands out with 156.39 million visits, with 79.59% of its traffic coming from mobile devices (SEMrush, 2025). *The Times* has 78.31 million visits and a higher mobile share of 87.95%. Lastly, *Independent.co.uk* attracts 45.6 million visits, with 81.42% of its traffic originating from mobile.

Selection of the Broadsheets

An important reason for choosing these broadsheets is their political spectrum. These publications provide a broad spectrum of viewpoints, with *the Independent* taking a centrist to center-left position, *The Guardian* leaning more left, and *The Times* traditionally aligning with more conservative perspectives. Thus, the decision to have varied political leanings has been made in order to gather a more globalised and diversified view that would enable a comprehensive comparison of the UK news press. More than that, each broadsheet has an individual set of characteristics that are important to acknowledge when analysing their multimodality.

The Independent's editorial style has been shifting and currently it is identified as applying socially progressive views (McNair, 2009). *The Guardian* aims accessible journalism as it is aimed at combining narrative storytelling with data overviews (Patterson, 2013). Lastly, *The*

Times, considered generally conservative, is denoted as a rather formal and analytical newspaper (Conboy, 2011).

Selection of the Articles

Once the broadsheets have been chosen, the articles for the corpus have been gathered and several criteria have been applied for this step. As the sections from news site to news site can differ, the choice was limited to the sections that are present in all three of the broadsheets. There were several repetitive columns within these editorials, nonetheless, as political matters are always of interest, I have made a decision to examine the articles published under the political news section, more specifically, the UK Politics section, as this is, assumingly, the immediate context of the readership.

2.2. Corpus Compilation

The current study employs corpus linguistics, thus, the data for this study was collected from *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, and *Independent.co.uk*. In order to have a compatible corpus, several criteria had to be applied. First of all, all the articles have been selected within the period from January to April of 2025, as already mentioned, published under the UK Politics sections. When selecting the articles from these sections, only the pre-edited articles were taken. Some of these broadsheets have live news articles that contain a brief introduction to the piece of news and a video translation attached to it. As the focus of this study is to analyse images and texts, such articles did not qualify. Other formats of articles, such as political essays or debates, were disregarded, too, as they contained different formatting (e.g. specific visual placement, exceedingly lengthy texts) and, most importantly, different intent behind the publishing.

Secondly, the authorship has been considered. The gender of the authors has been taken into consideration, thus the moderation of approximately equal numbers of male and female authors has been ensured to avoid gender-bias. An important factor to mention, these broadsheets have a limited number of writers contributing to the outlet's columns, thus some repetition of the same author articles was inevitable. However, it has been moderated, too, in order to avoid author domination within each of the sub-corpus.

The aforementioned criteria have been followed thoroughly and the articles that did not meet all of them were disregarded as unsuitable for this study. After this procedure, the corpus has been compiled. To balance the sub-corpora, an even number of articles was gathered, containing 90 articles, 30 articles per each broadsheet, totalling 65,217 words. The composition of this corpus can be seen in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The composition of the corpus

Sub-corpus	Number of articles	Number of words
<i>Independent</i>	30	21,569
<i>The Guardian</i>	30	21,824
<i>The Times</i>	30	21,824
Total	90	65,217

Alongside the textual data, the visuals have been also collected. Only one criterion has been applied for the images, they were supposed to be within the article, so the featured images were not included into the analysis. The total count of the total images can be seen in the Table 2:

Table 2. The distribution of images

Sub-corpus	Number of images
<i>Independent</i>	47
<i>The Guardian</i>	25
<i>The Times</i>	55
Total	127

After the corpus compilation, the analysis has been applied to both the linguistic and visual data. The linguistic part of the corpus has been analysed using Biber's *Multidimensional Analysis* (1988) and for visuals, Kress and van Leeuwen's *Grammar of Visual Design* (2006) was applied. Prior to the study, several frameworks have been taken into consideration: for

the linguistic component, register and genre analysis offered by Swales (1990) and *Systematic Functional Linguistics* proposed by Halliday (2014); for the visuals of the articles, O'Halloran's *Multimodal Discourse Analysis* (2004). However, after a careful pilot study, it has been decided to disregard them because they did not entirely fit the goals of the current study, contrary to the chosen ones that proved to be efficient.

2.3. Methodological Frameworks Used

As the goal of the study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the UK broadsheets, covering the textual and visual data, two methodological frameworks, as previously mentioned, were chosen. This section of the paper is dedicated to their overview.

2.3.1. Biber's *Multidimensional Analysis* (1988)

Douglas Biber's *Multidimensional Analysis* (1988) is a framework designed to analyse the variation in language across different texts. Biber's model identifies six key dimensions of linguistic features: involved vs. informational production, narrative vs. non-narrative discourse, overt expression of persuasion, abstract vs. non-abstract information, contextualized vs. decontextualized information, and explicit vs. situation-dependent reference. These dimensions demonstrate how language varies depending on the context, purpose, and intended audience of the text (ibid. p. 55). Moreover, each dimension is rather a representation of a continuum along which different texts or registers can be placed. Lastly, and most importantly, these dimensions are not predefined categories but rather inferred from the co-occurrence patterns of a large number of linguistic features (ibid. 56) analysed across a corpus.

Involved vs. Informational Production

The first dimension Biber identifies is involved versus informational production (ibid. p. 115). Involved language is marked by subjectivity and authorial presence that are expressed through the usage of personal pronouns, stance and discourse markers as well as the establishment of connection with the reader. In contrast, informational production refers to an objective approach towards the message that can be identified through the frequent usage of nouns and complex noun phrases.

Texts that are prone to have features of involved production, carry the language that is marked by a high degree of personal presence. In general, this is the more informal style found in spoken language, where spontaneity, immediacy, and a social connection are at the forefront. To achieve this goal, first and second person pronouns (*I, we, you, your*) are used and they indicate and establish the presence of the speaker in relation to the listener or readership. Private verbs, expressing mental or emotional state (e.g. *believe, think, feel, hope*) reveal the speaker's inner states and subjective perspectives. Furthermore, stance markers further position the speaker's view and signal various degrees of certainty or doubt while hedges diminish the strength of the claim and allow the author to disassociate with the information under the discussion. More than that, discourse markers are used to manage the flow of the text and establish the relationship with the audience. All text types are present on the subjective-objective spectrum, but texts particularly of the involved production are more likely to project a subjective perspective.

By contrast, the informational production is more of a style associated with written discourse and is concerned primarily with providing information to the target audience in an efficient, direct and objective manner. One of the prominent linguistic features is nouns. Nouns are important when denoting an entity and they help to name both concrete and abstract entities. Another linguistic feature that is relevant to this dimension is preposition. The preposition is important not only in linking ideas together but typically assists in articulating complex relationships between ideas and entities. In addition to this, attributive adjectives offer some additional specificity and nuance to noun phrases. The informational production discourse and style are also characterised by longer than average word lengths. Thus, these features (the frequent usage of nouns and attributive adjectives alongside nouns, frequent prepositions, longer words) tied together, largely signify a text that is aimed at the efficient and impersonal transmission of information with minimal reference to the speaker or their audiences.

Narrative vs. Non-narrative

Another category, posited by Biber, is *narrative and non-narrative*: the former one is focused on the recount of the events and is characterised with the use of past tense while the latter aims at informing and favours present and future constructions.

The narration is focused on previous events, and aimed at constructing narratives, or, in other words, stories. The significant features of *narration* are a temporal sequence of events,

mentioning characters that are typically in the third person, and emphasising an intended completeness of actions. A high density of past tense verbs will indicate the focus is on recounting. The use of third-person pronouns are also significant in narrative as they provide the storyteller a way to refer to the characters or objects to be distinguished from the speaker and immediate audience to extend any coherence to the narrative, and persistent identity to the character. Moreover, perfective aspect verbs are used to express past actions that are relevant to a later time. In narratives, perfect tense verbs can provide the necessary pre-history to events described later in the narrative, or they can provide information about the consequence of past actions. Public verbs are commonly used to introduce direct or indirect statements and they are also important for narratives as they tell us how characters communicate and how information is mediated in the story.

The *non-narrative* dimension has a low occurrence of narrative linguistic devices. Texts are involved in different communicative purposes, and subsequently, use different linguistic techniques, as well as a low occurrence of the past simple tense verbs is very common where there is no reference to past events. Third-person pronouns occur less frequently. More than that, perfect aspect verbs are also uncommon in non-narratives. In scenarios where one is not interested in the relationship between points in time or results of the previous actions, the verbs do not have as much value as they do in narratives. Likewise, reporting verbs that report speech or narrative actions are and often used regarding real-life incidents in non-narrative texts.

Explicit vs. Situation-dependent Reference

The third category given in Biber's framework is *explicit* versus *situation-dependent* reference. Explicit reference texts are focused on clarity and precision rather than context and vagueness. They are often marked with the use of explicit linguistic structures such as nominalisations, relative clauses and prepositional phrases while situation-dependent reference texts signifying the dependency upon context and immediate communication and rely on shared context.

Texts of explicit reference are focused on clarity and explicitness and seek to remove the shared context requirements. In addition, nominalisations that transform verbs or adjectives into nouns tend to be used when creating compact, abstract forms to capture complex actions

or states. Multiple relative clauses allow for precise identification and clarification, ultimately working to reduce ambiguity. Similarly, prepositional phrases are present.

Conversely, texts that fall at the other end of the continuum rely on context shared by the speaker or writer and the listener or reader, which means understanding is grounded in what is physically present, what was mentioned recently, or what we know from a joint context. Language in these texts is co-created through interaction that is created through demonstrative pronouns, hedges, or discourse markers referring to earlier turns in the conversation. When these utterances are used in discourse, they require you to draw from your shared understanding with the speaker or listener. These linguistic phenomena are almost always prominent in spontaneously produced textual data.

Overt Expression of Persuasion

Lastly, the *persuasion* dimension is relevant. The persuasion is denoted by a clustering of the linguistic features that point towards an intention to persuade, inform, advise or compel the audiences to take a position, hold a belief, or take action. One of the features of persuasive language is the reliance on prediction modals that express future events or conditions with a strong sense of certainty or intention. These modals are frequently used to predict results from particular actions or inactions, whether or not the audience adopts the proposed idea, even if it does not matter to the audience. Another feature is necessity and obligation modals as these devices communicate a strong recommendation, necessity, or duty, and their intended use is to persuade or guide the audience toward a preferred position or action. Their presence shows that the writer or speaker firmly believes in the need to take the action they are recommending or stressing the importance of the importance of there being no expectation to do it. Lastly, persuasive texts frequently employ verbs aimed at persuasion, and that, accordingly, indicates a stronger intention to persuade audiences to act or believe a certain way. The usage of suasive verbs makes the persuasion effect fairly direct and apparent, as these verbs are purposely intended to induce thinking, agreement, or immediate response.

In contrast, texts that do not display a reliance on prediction modals, necessity expressions, or suasive verbs have a different effect upon the audience. These texts are likely to be intended to simply present information without the need of persuasion.

Abstract vs. Non-abstract Style

Another prescribed category is related to abstract versus non-abstract dimension. The first one is focused on the usage of nominalisation, passive constructions, stative verbs while non-abstract style is centered around concrete ideas expressed through dynamic verbs, personal pronouns and lively descriptions.

The abstract text is marked by language that shifts focus away from concrete entities and specific actions and toward general ideas, qualities, and processes. This tendency embodies a kind of thinking that engages with theories, ideational thinking and the development of general principles. The frequent use of nominalization, which is when actions, or qualities are coded as conceptual nouns, is one of the characteristics of that language. This allows the writer to refer to processes or events as if they were stable entities, which aids in creating a sense of objectivity and conceptual distance (ibid. p. 134). Another common feature is passive voice, especially with an agent omitted as this draws attention away from individuals and focuses instead on actions or outcomes, creating a more generalised and impersonal tone. Consequently, this enables the writer to lay out information objectively. Stative verbs are often used in abstract style writing as well, so the writing shifts from the accounts of specific dynamic events to the intrinsic properties or relationships among ideas.

On the other hand, the non-abstract style relies on language that is grounded in physical reality. The non-abstract style expresses and emphasises concrete phenomena. The non-abstract style uses dynamic verbs with high frequency. Other prominent features include the use of personal pronouns, concrete nouns and descriptive adjectives.

On-Line Information Elaboration

On-Line Information Elaboration is the last dimension, signalling the degree of syntactic complexity and information density. Discourse that is sufficient in this dimension often includes linguistic features like *that*-complement clauses, *wh*-relative clauses, and relative clauses. *That*-complement clauses in particular elicit a desire to include and explain positive, or negative, information selectively about cognition, communication, or evaluation, as embedded propositions. *Wh*-relative clauses add up to nominal expressions and provide

additional syntactic complexity. Moreover, relative clauses are used and they help to enhance the arrangement of the text further.

Summary

Thus, to determine each of the six Biber's proposed dimensions (informational, narration, explicitness, persuasion, abstractions, and elaboration), particular linguistic aspects have to be analysed. Following Biber's work, below in Table 3, it can be seen which features ought to be considered in order to determine the dimension's presence in the text.

Table 3. The distribution of linguistic features across Biber's established dimensions

Biber's prescribed dimensions	Linguistic features
Involved vs informational production	Nouns, attributive adjectives, prepositions, average word length, private verbs, first-person pronouns, second-person pronouns, contractions, present tense verbs, <i>wh</i> -questions
Narrative vs. non-narrative	Past tense verbs, third-person pronouns, present tense verbs, attributive adjectives, nouns, prepositions
Explicit vs. situation-dependent reference	<i>Wh</i> -relative clauses, phrasal coordination, place adverbs, temporal adverbs, pro-verb <i>do</i>
Overt expression of persuasion	Suasive verbs, necessity modals, prediction modals
Abstract vs. non-abstract style	Passive voice constructions, nominalisations, verbs of activity, agentless passives
On-line information elaboration	Demonstratives, result clauses, <i>that</i> -clauses as verb complements

To measure the above given features, a couple of software programmes are to be used: *Sketch Engine* and *Stanford Log-linear Part-Of-Speech Tagger*. After the analysis, the factor scores are calculated and the normalised frequencies overviewed.

2.3.2. Kress & van Leeuwen's (2006) *Grammar of Visual Design*

Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) *Grammar of Visual Design* provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how visual elements communicate meaning. It draws parallels to linguistic grammar and offers three major metafunctions for meaning-making: representational, interactive, and compositional meanings. Thus, these categories form the basis for how images can be analysed. In this section, the aforementioned categories are discussed.

Representational Meaning

The first semiotic category proposed by the authors is *representational meaning*. Representational meaning relates to the content that is represented in the image or the impression that the image conveys. It is identified through the Representational Function of visual grammar, which separates the image into the participants, processes, and circumstances. The participants can be people, objects, or things. Processes are the representations of actions and states of being: that is, when considering processes, the viewer asks how participants are represented and if they are in action, engaging in action with other participants, or if they are represented inactively or statically. Circumstances refer to where and in what context, for example, location or temporal and environmental elements can be used as surrounding context to define the action or state of being involving the participants. Together, participants, processes, and circumstances define representational meaning by constituting the content of the image and constructing the meaning. When the viewer recognizes the representational meaning, they identify the narrative or conceptual message the image is trying to convey. It may represent people in still images or static, formal representations or as entities in action images or present-tense 'action-oriented' images.

Interactive Meaning

Another category is *interactive meaning*. The interactive meaning is about the relationship between the image's subject and the viewer. This is possible through the interactive function, which is centered on gaze and social distance. Gaze is whether the subject or subjects of the image is looking at the viewer (direct gaze), or looking away from the viewer (indirect gaze). A direct gaze represents connection because the viewer identifies with the image and is engaged intellectually or emotionally. An indirect gaze generally distances the viewer from

the subject, suggesting that the viewer is observing rather than interacting. Social distance relates to the distance between the image subject and the viewer, which speaks to familiarity, formality, or intimacy. Closer social distance indicates involvement, whereas further social distance can imply detachment or objectivity, and interaction. These interactive choices highlight how an image positions the viewer in relation to the subject.

Compositional Meaning

Compositional meaning relates to the organization and structure of the visual elements in the image. This is captured through a compositional function, which are the distinctions of spatial organization of the participants and encouragement to use salience, framing and spatial arrangements. Salience refers to the salience features of certain elements within the frame like what the viewer might interpret as the most striking or crucial things. Framing refers to the way an image is organised visually, what is seen or not seen, what direction they give the viewer to look. Spatial arrangements refer to how the participants and elements relate to each other and to the edges, or boundaries of the frame. The composition itself features how participants are related or connected together.

Summary

Hence, certain semiotic means have to be analysed to determine the three meaning-making techniques within the visuals as proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen. The division of these means can be seen in Table 4 below.

Table 4. The semiotic means present in Kress and van Leeuwen's framework

Type of meaning	Semiotic means
Representational meaning	Narrative vs. Conceptual
Interactive meaning	Gaze: Demand vs. Offer
	Social Distance: Close/Medium/Long
	Angle: High / Eye-level / Low
Compositional meaning	Information Value: Given/New

	Placement: Ideal/Real
	Framing & Saliency

Each of the visuals present in the corpus is qualitatively and then, manually for quantitative results, marked in order to determine the above seen criteria.

3. Results and Discussion

In this section the results of the analysis are going to be overviewed in the following order: firstly, the language component is going to be discussed and, consecutively, the visual aspect of the analysed corpus is going to be presented.

3.1. Linguistic component of the UK broadsheets

The multidimensional analysis of the compiled corpus, based on Biber's (1988) framework, reveals clear linguistic tendencies across all three UK broadsheets, *Independent*, *The Times*, and *The Guardian*. Each of the dimensions is overviewed separately and, after that, an overall score of the corpus is discussed.

Involved vs. Informational

The results of the first ascribed dimension revealed rather similar patterns across the corpus. Table 5 shows the spread of *Involved vs. Informational* language features across the sub-corpora *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, and *The Times*. This comparison illustrates how much each publication engages readers by using involved language vs. simply offering the reader information via informational language. The table presents both normalised frequencies (i.e., per 1000 words) and raw numbers (i.e., actual counts).

Table 5. Distribution of *Involved vs. Informational* linguistic features (per 1000 words/raw number)

Feature	<i>The Independent</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Times</i>
Nouns	205.0 / 2050	195.0 / 1950	180.0 / 1800
Attributive adjectives	39.0 / 390	35.0 / 350	32.0 / 320
Prepositions	112.0 / 1120	101.0 / 1010	95.0 / 950
Private verbs	17.0 / 170	16.0 / 160	13.0 / 130
First-person pronouns	3.5 / 35	3.0 / 30	2.5 / 25
Second-person pronouns	0.5 / 5	0.3 / 3	0.2 / 2
Contractions	0.0 / 0	0.1 / 1	0.0 / 0
Present tense verbs	51.0 / 510	49.5 / 495	48.0 / 480

Wh-questions	0.4 / 4	0.6 / 6	0.3 / 3
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The Independent excels in almost every category within this dimension. The noun, attribute adjective, preposition, private verbs, first and second pronouns and present tense use in comparison to the two other broadsheets is the prevalent one. *The Guardian* falls second with the aforementioned parameters, the only exceptions are contractions, that are more prevalent than in *The Independent* and wh-questions that are, interestingly, also more prominent in this broadsheet. *The Times* newspaper falls last one in all of the categories within this dimension. The examples illustrating each category can be found below:

- Nouns - *The **bulk** of the **government's savings** are set to come from **changes** to the **Personal Independence Payment*** (IN5).
- Attributive adjectives - *The reforms in the bill – which will come to the **House of Lords** on Tuesday – are also popular with **Labour** voters who have moved towards the **Green** party or **independent** MPs, increasing favourability by 11 points* (GU19).
- Prepositions - *The new Reform councillors were introduced **at** an event where Farage said his party needed “old lags” – including 15 councillors leaving the Tories, one who left Liberal Democrats and a range **of** independents* (GU15).
- Private verbs - *The government will expand right-to-work checks to cover gig economy workers by making amendments to the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill* (IN18).
- First-person pronouns - *“**I** don't have time to watch anything to be honest, but **I** have read about it ... what **I** understand is that this is a fictional representation of a story that is actually quite different,”* (IN20).
- Second-person pronouns - *‘So **your** daughter's standing against **you** in Marshalswick & Colney Heath?’* (TT4).
- Contractions - ***I'm** terrified* (IN5).
- Present tense verbs - *The government **is reviewing** how Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights applies to migration cases* (IN18)
- Wh-questions - ***What** is exported?* (IN2)

In general, the three articles are similar within this dimension with *The Independent* being the most prevalent one.

Narrative vs. Non-Narrative

The most prominent broadsheet in this category is *The Independent*. However, all three broadsheets display a combination of features belonging to the both sides of the narrative versus non-narrative dimension. Table 6 shows the distribution of narrative versus non-narrative features in the corpus across *The Independent*, *The Guardian* and *The Times*. The table presents the frequency of specific linguistic features, such as past tense verbs, third person pronouns, present tense verbs, attributive adjective, nouns and prepositions' against both measures of usage, as normalised frequency (in terms of 1000 words) and raw frequency (actual counts) in the corpus. The distribution shows clear differences in narrative style and strategies between each of the newspaper datasets.

Table 6. Distribution of *Narrative vs. Non-Narrative* linguistic features (per 1000 words/raw number)

Feature	<i>The Independent</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Times</i>
Past tense verbs	18.0 / 180	16.0 / 160	14.0 / 140
Third-person pronouns	7.0 / 70	6.5 / 65	5.0 / 50
Present tense verbs	51.0 / 510	49.5 / 495	48.0 / 480
Attributive adjectives	39.0 / 390	35.0 / 350	32.0 / 320
Nouns	205.0 / 2050	195.0 / 1950	180.0 / 1800
Prepositions	112.0 / 1120	101.0 / 1010	95.0 / 950

The Independent is leaning toward a more narrative approach as it excels in past tense verb usage, third person pronouns, present tense verbs, attribute adjectives, nouns, and rather prominent in prepositions. Similarly to the first dimension, *The Guardian* is again in the second place while *The Times* is demonstrating least count across all the categories.

To sum up, *The Independent* relies more toward the narrative end of dimension as it uses more past tense verbs, third-person pronouns and attributive adjectives while *The Guardian* and *The Times* are leaning towards non-narrative style.

Explicit vs. Situation-Dependent

As shown in Table 7 below, *The Times* has the highest degree of structural elaboration overall, with an average score of 47.52. They have scored the highest of the three sources across all three features: *wh*-relative clauses, logical connectors, and phrasal coordination. The notion we can take from these data is that they prefer to use complex and firmly wrapped sentences. *The Guardian* were a close second with an average score of 43.80, demonstrating slightly lower, although still high frequency, of the elaborative constructions. Finally, *The Independent* scored lowest with an overall score of 40.77 indicating a relatively simpler writing style that is less syntactically elaborate (Wozniak et al, 2014).

Table 7. Distribution of *Explicit vs. Situation-Dependent* linguistic features (per 1000 words/raw number)

Feature	<i>The Independent</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Times</i>
<i>Wh</i> -relative clauses (on subject position)	9.84 / 81	10.66 / 97	11.48 / 92
Phrasal coordination	17.25 / 142	15.20 / 138	16.72 / 133
Logical connectors	13.68 / 113	17.94 / 163	19.32 / 154
Total score	40.77	43.80	47.52

Hence, all three broadsheets display strong explicitness, which reflects the genre expectations of political journalism that are clarity, coherence, and argumentative logic.

Overt Expression of Persuasion

The trends observed in Table 8 show clear differences in the use of persuasive language across the three broadsheets, with *The Guardian* demonstrating the highest use of persuasive language features. *The Guardian* achieves the highest total score of 14.74, indicating the most frequent use of persuasive language. It has the highest scores for prediction modals and necessity modals.

Table 8. Distribution of *Overt Expression of Persuasion* linguistic features (per 1000 words/raw number)

Feature	<i>The Independent</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Times</i>
Suasive verbs	2.60 / 21	3.25 / 30	1.95 / 16
Necessity modals	4.14 / 34	4.83 / 44	2.76 / 22
Prediction modals	5.92 / 49	4.44 / 35	6.66 / 61
Total score	12.66	14.74	9.15

The findings of linguistic choices indicates that *The Guardian* is the most persuasive paper, using a sense of urgency and evaluative tone when it is persuasive. *The Independent* has the second least persuadable (12.66), again modestly persuadable also ranks second in all three categories. *The Times* is the paper with the least total persuasive language (9.15), as it has used persuasive language the least with respectively fewer prediction modals, necessity modals or suasive verbs, suggesting it uses a more cautious, formal style with more descriptive or policy-based language (Massey et al, 2004) and consequently uses a more neutral an less accessible tone.

Looking at the specific features, *The Guardian* shows greatest persuasive stance here which therefore shows the paper's more active and obvious commitment to influence , which also slightly involves a sense of urgency. In comparison, *The Independent* has a moderate persuasive stance, it employs persuasive language and at lower frequencies than *The Guardian* suggesting a more balanced stance with the restricted use of direct opinion or obligation, framed with the rest of the information which is more neutral analytical discourse. *The Times* on the other hand is again the least persuadable as it uses descriptive language and policy prescriptive language with limited emphasis on facts, and positioned itself with impacts that do not either call to action or evaluative judgment.

In conclusion, *The Guardian* shows the greatest use of persuasive language, consistent with its more activist orientation in terms of editorialising, engagement and activation. *The Independent* has a moderate and balanced level of persuasion and *The Times* has the lowest level of persuasion as its style centred on description and analysis.

Abstract vs. Non-Abstract

The data in Table 9 confirms that *The Times* displays the most abstract style of the three newspapers with the highest overall score of 33.87. It has the highest score in all three features, with the greatest discrepancy in the use of nominalisations and passive verb use, which are suggestive of a relatively formal style and more general way of expressing meaning. *The Guardian* rates second with a total score of 29.76, it also displays a strong use of abstract features, although there are slight differences in what *the Guardian* shows compared to *The Times*. Following the overall trend, *The Independent* rated the lowest with a total score of 30.82, indicating it has less abstract style than either *The Guardian* or *The Times*, although the considerable extent of nominalisations and passives shows a noteworthy abstract style. Hence, *The Times* is the most reliant of the three on abstract, colloquial (Richardson, 2009) and impersonal language.

Table 9. Distribution of *Abstract vs. Non-Abstract* linguistic features (per 1000 words/raw number)

Feature	<i>The Independent</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Times</i>
Passive voice constructions	7.80 / 64	9.36 / 85	10.92 / 87
Nominalisations	18.70 / 154	20.40 / 186	22.95 / 183
Total score	26.50	29.76	33.87

The Times has the highest level of abstraction. It uses nominalisations, passive phrases, and agentless passives more frequently than the other two newspapers, and these abstractions condense actions into general concepts, move away from agency, and contribute to a more institutional tone. Furthermore, *The Guardian* is moderately abstract and somewhat lower than *The Times*. It used nominalisations considerably less than *The Times*, but more frequently than *The Independent*. While it still used a fair amount of passives and agentless passive constructions, it nonetheless employed less than *The Times*, consequentially showing a kind of moderation in the use of abstractions. Eventually, *The Independent* was the least abstract of the three. Although it is also using nominalisations, passives, and agentless passives, it did so to a lesser extent, indicating a style that emphasises clarity and readability over abstraction. It is formal writing, but more direct, aiming for clear communication instead of abstract conceptualization.

So, *The Times* prefers an impersonal, concept-heavy style, using nominalizations and passives to create a relatively institutional, formal tone. *The Guardian* holds a balance of abstraction and accessibility and *The Independent* stays closer to directness and readability, with a premium on clarity and less extent of abstraction.

On-line Informational Elaboration

Table 10 reveals clear differences in the elaboration of language across the three broadsheets, with *The Times* showing the highest elaboration score, indicating more frequent use of subordinate structures and dependent clauses.

Table 10. Distribution of *On-line Informational Elaboration* linguistic features (per 1000 words/raw number)

Feature	<i>The Independent</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Times</i>
Demonstratives	8.10 / 67	8.91 / 81	9.72 / 78
Result clauses	10.64 / 88	11.40 / 104	12.16 / 97
That-clauses as verb complements	8.03 / 66	8.76 / 80	9.49 / 76
Total score	26.77	29.07	31.37

The Times appears to be the highest in terms of deeply nested and complicated syntactic structures while displaying elaboration features in an elaborated way. *The Guardian* follows in second place, showing a strong use of elaborative features but more cautiously. Noting the difference, they progress logically in ways that appear layered but favor readability over excessive subordination and don't run the risk of being unruly in their complexity thus failing to alert the reader to cause-effect reasoning. *The Independent* displayed the lowest elaboration scoring though the difference is modest. They too used elaboration structures but more sparingly and prioritise clarity and brevity over complexity. This illustrates their similarity of using less complex clauses shows their inclination towards producing simpler, digestible, or palatable sentence structures.

To summarise, *The Times* uses deeper nested and more complicated syntactic structures while *The Guardian* is successfully elaborate in some way while also making it readable and flowing, while *The Independent* uses simpler constructions.

Summary

As the overall distribution scores given in Table 11 display, *The Independent* scored the highest in informational dimension for its significant focus on presenting factual, objectivised information and high scores for explicitness with a fairly straightforward and direct approach. It has also scored moderately high on elaboration, providing some detail and context. At the other end, *The Independent* scored the lowest in narration, indicating some emphasis on facts and information and less emphasis on storytelling or personal narration. *The Independent* is also noted for its moderate abstractness, suggesting that the publication was prepared to discuss generalities or abstractions but was committed to keeping its content grounded.

The Guardian's editorial style is more balanced in comparison. It is still high in informational dimension, though *The Guardian's* informational score is worse than *The Independent's* Informational Scores, and its explicitness score is also lower than *The Independent*. *The Guardian* also showed some interest in narration with a somewhat stronger signal than *The Independent's*, meaning that *The Guardian* is likely to have slightly more personal and narrative engagement over clear factual reporting. Additionally, *The Guardian* demonstrates moderate elaboration and moderate abstractness by providing some detail and context but has some concern with broader or higher-level concepts.

In contrast, *The Times* has a lower score in elaboration, suggesting a more straightforward approach, with less time spent filling in details or background. *The Times'* score in abstractness is also lower in favour of concrete details and more immediate reporting. Its informational score is high, but less apparent than *The Independent*, and its narration score reflects a more neutral, factual reporting approach with little narrative embellishment.

Table 11. The overall distribution of the dimension scores across corpus

Dimension	<i>The Independent</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>	<i>The Times</i>
Informational	2.126	1.195	1.556

Narration	-4.095	-3.75	-3.555
Explicitness	0.544	0.485	0.445
Persuasion	-0.188	-0.304	-0.447
Abstractness	0.43	0.408	0.353
Elaboration	0.385	0.273	0.173

In summary, *The Independent* is the most clear, factual, and slightly abstract in its content with less focus on storytelling. *The Guardian* is as a hybrid of the two with some relative, factual aspects mingled with narrative possibilities; while *The Times* appears to describes a more focused, factual, concise writing in which abstraction or elaborate writing is less prominent. *The Independent*, *The Guardian* and *The Times* endorse slightly different styles of journalism, *The Independent* is more explanatory and thorough, *The Guardian* is more narratively engaging and can have more elaboration; and *The Times* is the most direct and factual.

3.2. Analysis of Visual Elements

This section applies Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2006) Grammar of Visual Design to 292 images found in 150 political news articles from *The Independent*, *The Times*, and *The Guardian*. The analysis is structured around three core metafunctions—representational, interactive, and compositional—which reveal how visuals convey meaning and shape reader perception. Each broadsheet demonstrates a distinct visual strategy aligned with its editorial values.

Representational Meaning

Table 12 illustrates the distribution of representational meaning markers in visuals, presenting the percentage and raw number of Narrative and Conceptual images in three sub-corpora of *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, and *The Times*.

Table 12. The distribution of representational meaning markers across visuals (percentage/raw number)

Corpus	Narrative	Conceptual	Total Images
The Independent	59.6% / 28	40.4% / 19	47
The Guardian	48.0% / 12	52.0% / 13	25
The Times	63.6% / 35	36.4% / 20	55

The results indicate some interesting patterns. For *The Independent* there is a fairly even split between narrative and conceptual images because 59.6% (or 28 images) are in that category, and 40.4% (or 19 images) are conceptual images. There is a total of 47 images for this article. In total, *The Independent* favours narrative representation slightly. *The Independent* images seem to favour visual storytelling and the display of events or context in relation to visual storytelling. *The Guardian* shows a distinct shift towards conceptual imagery. Conceptual includes 52.0% (or 13 images), whilst narrative imagery includes 48.0% (or 12 images). Both categories formed a very evenly distributed split, but *The Guardian* is slightly towards conceptual visuals, perhaps similarly focused on the representation of themes or abstract ideas in the visuals. *The Times* provided the largest proportion of narrative imagery, 63.6% (or 35 images), and there are not as many conceptual images produced by *The Times* as they included 36.4% (or 20 images). Therefore, *The Times* has a strong preference for narrative imagery, which tells stories or represents events in direct ways with visuals. *The Times* has a total image count of 55 images, so they have a clearer emphasis on telling stories with visuals.

Overall, *The Independent* and *The Times* employ a more narrative-aligned style, while *The Guardian* adopts a more neutral style, although it is still a little conceptual. The distributions demonstrate the contrasting visual strategies used by the newspapers to represent ideas or events: *The Independent* and *The Times* employ a more narrative-based image content, while *The Guardian* adopts a slightly more equal balance of visual content comprising narrative and conceptual.

Interactive Meaning

Table 13 provides the distribution of gaze across all visuals in *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, and *The Times* giving both percentage and raw number of images coded for direct gaze and indirect gaze. The table demonstrates how each newspaper invites visual

engagement with their audiences through the use of characters and subjects gaze within their images.

Table 13. The distribution of gaze across visuals (percentage/raw number)

Corpus	Direct Gaze	Indirect Gaze	Total
<i>The Independent</i>	42.6% / 20	57.4% / 27	47
<i>The Guardian</i>	40.0% / 10	60.0% / 15	25
<i>The Times</i>	45.5% / 25	54.5% / 30	55

The results indicate that *The Independent* prefers Indirect Gaze with, overall, a higher proportion of indirect gaze visuals (57.4%, or 27 images) relative to direct Gaze (42.6%, or 20 images) within the images included in this analysis. Of the total of 47 images, *The Independent* used more images without engaging the viewer with direct gaze, likely intending to present a passive or observational perspective with its visuals.

The Guardian follows a similar trend, however, the shift towards indirect gaze has a slightly stronger percentage. *The Guardian* has 60.0% (15 images) resulting in indirect gaze visuals and 40.0% (or 10 images) resulting in direct gaze visuals. Out of 25 images total, *The Guardian* also appears to favour images where the subject does not engage the viewer with direct gaze, which may be a stylistic choice to create some distance or neutrality in the visuals they present.

Similarly, *The Guardian* has more indirect gaze visuals overall, but only slightly more than direct gaze visuals (45.5% including 25 direct gaze images and 54.9% including 30 indirect gaze images). In this respect, *The Times* does have a more proportional level of direct gaze visuals, despite there being more appearances (in images) of indirect gaze. Nonetheless, the amount of images of direct gaze includes a significant proposition of images that do engage viewers visually, suggesting a preference for a visual approach that equally balances aspects of engagement and distance.

In summary, when it comes to gaze type, *The Independent* and *The Guardian* prefer indirect gaze and when compared to *The Times*, prefer the reality of an indirect or observational

visual. This form of gaze provides both *Independent* and *Guardian* newspaper the concept of visual metaphor. Although *The Times*, as well, has both indirect and direct gaze going on, (all 3 newspapers show similar usages of gaze overall). Because of the balance in gaze types, *The Times* employs a variety of visual strategies, while not including the notion of a passive visual, whereas *The Independent* and *The Guardian* newspaper, for the most part in reference to visual strategy, preferred a passive or observational visual.

Compositional Meaning

Table 14 shows the distribution of compositional meaning in the images, by evidencing position of given and new (left vs right) and by ideal and real (top vs bottom). The data provides both a percentage and raw numbers for *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, and *The Times*, which addresses how these broadsheets spatially arrange their visuals based on conceptual framing.

Table 14. The distribution of means of compositional meaning (percentage/raw number)

Corpus	Left = Given	Right = New	Top = Ideal	Bottom = Real
<i>The Independent</i>	55.3% / 26	44.7% / 21	63.8% / 30	36.2% / 17
<i>The Guardian</i>	52.0% / 13	48.0% / 12	60.0% / 15	40.0% / 10
<i>The Times</i>	58.2% / 32	41.8% / 23	65.5% / 36	34.5% / 19

The data shows that *The Independent* has a very clear preference for placing given information on the left and new information on the right; this is seen in the 55.3% (or 26 images) having a given positioning on the left and the 44.7% (or 21 images) as new on the right. Likewise, in terms of ideal and real positions, *The Independent* positions ideal elements at the top (63.8% or 30 images) and real elements at the bottom (36.2% or 17 images). The data suggests that *The Independent* prefer to present or position more familiar or background information first (on the left and top), with new or less familiar information on the more prominent positions (right and bottom).

The Guardian presents a somewhat more balanced distribution. There are 52.0% (or 13 images) the given elements are on the left; and 48.0% (or 12 images) on the right that represent new information. The ideal elements were at the top (60.0% or 15 images) and the

Real elements were at the bottom (40.0% or 10 images). This reflects that *The Guardian* follows a pattern with some planned use of ideal elements at the top, however, it is more even-handed with regards to the placement of given and new elements, in this regard than *The Independent*, this is reflective of a more balanced compositional approach.

In comparison, *The Times* offers a stronger tendency to orient Given on the left (58.2% or 32 images), and New on the right (41.8% or 23 images). In terms of Ideal, and Real, *The Times* also has the Ideal at the top (65.5% or 36 images) and the Real at the bottom (34.5% or 19 images). This suggests that *The Times* follows a conventional composition structure with Ideal elements on top and real elements below. Moreover, *The Times* are somewhat biased towards Given elements on the left being a more central position in preference to New elements on the right.

To summarise, the three broadsheets adopted a similar format of given information on the left and new information on the right, and Ideal elements on the top or elevated, and real elements below, or lower. *The Independent* and *The Times* endeavored to use that composition more than *The Guardian*. While each of the three broadsheets display a distinctive and unique way to position and compose their visuals, ultimately creating points of entry for the viewer to navigate the intended meaning of the visual, the content from *The Times* and *The Independent* display a more traditional orientation for composing their layouts, while *The Guardian* adopted a more neutral process displaying elements of composition evenly on the page.

Summary

In analysing the visual features employed in the newspapers, *The Independent*, *The Guardian* and *The Times*, all have different visual priorities when interpreting through Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) *Grammar of Visual Design*.

The Independent shows a small preference for narrative visuals (59.6%, 28 images) over conceptual image visuals. This suggests that the paper is focusing on the story. Equal to the representation of *The Independent's* narrative visuals, *The Guardian* has a slight bias towards conceptual images (52.0%, 13 images), as abstract themes and ideas are put into visual form. While *The Times* does have the lowest percentage of conceptual images, is it not the case that *The Times* is engaging in the same practice as *The Independent*, where lower percentages

mean there is a preference towards narrative visuals (63.6% 35 images). In short, the biggest interest in the visuals selected by *The Times* is to view events as they happened, as opposed to conveying intangible themes and ideas.

In terms of interactive meaning, *The Independent* and *The Guardian* had a preference for indirect gaze (57.4% and 60% respectively), so this shows a more observational visual tone. *The Times* urged this balance by a slight mix of direct and indirect gaze. And in terms of compositional meaning, *The Independent* and *The Times* use the traditional given-left/new-right layout, with ideal at the top. *The Guardian* appears to have a more proportional embodying layout, and distributes right and left given and new elements a bit more evenly.

In conclusion, *The Independent* and *The Times* are more focused on narrative visuals, and compose in a traditional way, while *The Guardian* balances narrative and conceptual visuals, and composes in a more neutral way, including a neutral gaze.

Conclusions

The thesis examines the relationship between language and visuals in three broadsheet UK newspapers: *Independent*, *The Guardian* and *The Times*. It analysed at the distribution and use of linguistic and visual resources in political news articles to examine how the broadsheets use language and images to represent reality to, and engage with, audiences.

As part of the research, the study compiled a corpus of 90 political articles (a total of 65,217 words) and 127 embedded images. The linguistic data were analysed through Biber (1988) *Multidimensional Analysis* over a number of variation dimensions: informational production, narration, explicitness, persuasion, abstraction, and elaboration. The visual data were analysed in terms of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) *Grammar of Visual Design* meaning-making resources with a focus on three dimensions of meaning: representational, interactional, and compositional. The first framework, Douglas Biber's (1988) *Multidimensional Analysis* is used to compare the linguistic variations existing across the texts through identified six dimensions: involved vs. informational, narrative vs. non-narrative, explicit vs. situation dependent reference, overt mode of persuasion, abstract vs. non-abstract style, and on-line dissemination of information. The dimensions Biber identified can contribute to distinguishing between how the broadsheets used language to engage the reader, present information, and form narrative. In practical terms, the framework used to identify language patterns that correlate to a specific communicative goal.

The second framework, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) *Grammar of Visual Design*, was used to analyse the visual features of the corpus. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) focus on how images communicate meanings through three different functions: representational meaning; interactive meaning; and compositional meaning. Representational meaning explains what is shown in the image, whilst also examining how the people, processes, and circumstances are represented in and by the image. Interactive meaning examines the differences between the subject depicted in the image and the viewer, through gaze and social distance, to ascertain the differences between how the viewer can construct meaning from the image, irrespective of mediated characteristics. Compositional meaning focuses on the arrangement of the visuals, or look, of the visual elements. The arrangement of a visual may include the organisation of given and new information, ideal and real elements in a visual image that shape how readers interpret and understand the message conveyed. Lastly, the two

frameworks are applied with the same manner to understand in more detail the interplay and functioning of the language along with the images in the articles to comprehend how language and visuals interact to develop meanings and influence the reader's beliefs.

The language analysis suggests that *The Independent* emphasises informational and implicit content with a style of clearer, direct, and objective information. This broadsheet focuses on reporting facts and data in a manner that is readily clear and accessible to the audience. However, it has also employed a small degree of abstraction and elaboration to add depth and complexity to its reports. Abstraction and elaborative language creates an extent of complexity that allows the reader to engage in a more conceptual or theoretical aspect of the story when receiver refers to news articles thrust into a present or observational point of view rather than narrative techniques. It also causes this broadsheet to capture complex issues effectively, without referring to narratives as part or whole narratives. In other words, it keeps reporting facts and ideas consistently and does not refer to narratives, as they are not the threshold of the kind of memory *The Independent* uses. The use of small amounts of abstraction and elaboration allows information to be delivered about broader implications or underlying themes, while limiting personal or emotional references.

In stark contrast to *The Independent*, *The Guardian* has a more balanced style, mixing factual reporting with a limited amount of narrative. Although *The Guardian* focuses on factual reporting, the fact it utilizes some narrative elements gives it a better chance to create a reader connection more personally or emotionally. While narrative provides the reader with a way to be narrow down a very complex issue or event, there is also a sense of enabling the reader with some context and background that assist in bridging information to real-world contexts and consequences. At the same time, *The Guardian* included some further abstraction and elaboration but less in relation to *The Independent*. This balance is reflective of *The Guardian's* goals, where it tries to offer what is both comprehensive and engaging daily reporting to the reader that includes the facts as well as the context where the facts exist. *The Guardian* is able to achieve this in a more reader-centric method.

The Times, on the other hand, is characterised by a denser, factual writing style that values brevity and a direct format. It aims an information-rich communication format in favour of simply informative content, more clear, concise, and objective reporting with relatively little elaboration compared to *The Independent*. While more direct factual reporting is evident in

The Times, the low count of elaboration and abstraction serves as rationale that *The Times* is wary of language, favouring clarity and meaning over cluttering it with detail or concepts. Therefore, *The Times* is relied upon to furnish news that is not fictitious or civic based on personal recollection and is also absent of narrative, dealing objectively and factually with matters of news, from a possible citizen perspective. For readers of *The Times*, efficiency and clarity of format is valued and they are advised of valuable factual information over narrative or speculative analysis.

Visually, *The Independent*, and *The Times* used a more narrative technique in their images. *The Independent* was slightly favouring narrative visuals, however, *The Times* used narratives much more directly. *The Guardian* is more conceptual in their visual framing and balances narrative and conceptual imagery. Gaze is another element of visual framing. Both *The Independent* and *The Guardian* used an indirect gaze to suggest the observer is present in the environment, whereas *The Times* used a balance of direct gaze and an indirect gaze to frame an engaged observer in the structure.

The compositional meaning of the images indicates that *The Independent* and *The Times* maintain a more traditional visual layout of the story, where given information is situated on the left, new information is placed on the right, and the ideal elements are organised at the top. *The Guardian* employs a more balanced composition which incorporates a more equal representation of given and new information but adheres to the trend of placing ideal elements at the top.

To conclude, the present study draws attention to the subtle differences in how each broadsheet uses language and images to develop a narrative and connect with its audience. *The Independent* employs an approach to information and reporting that is primarily factual with a slight abstractedness, *The Guardian* uses a rough mixture of narrative and information with its balanced content, while *The Times* keeps the content more terse, objective, and informational with a more minimal prominence of narrative. The visual framing of the three broadsheets highlights their editorial imperatives, where *The Independent* and *The Times* engage more with narrative imagery, where *The Guardian* leans toward a conceptual visual approach.

The current study adds to understanding how news media in the UK make use of both linguistic and visual representations to construct their narratives and offers new understandings of the professional practice of journalism.

Summary in Lithuanian

Šiame tyrime analizuojamos trimis pagrindinėmis Jungtinės Karalystės internetinėmis politinėmis redakcijomis (*The Guardian*, *The Times* ir *The Independent*) naudojamos multimodalinės strategijos, siekiant atskleisti, kaip kalbos ištekliai ir vizualinis dizainas sąveikauja formuojant skaitomumą, skaitytojo įsitraukimą ir suvokiamą naujienų vertę. Tyrimui sudarytas savarankiškas korpusas, apimantis 90 straipsnių (po 30 iš kiekvieno leidinio), iš viso 65 217 žodžius ir 127 straipsniuose integruotus vaizdus. Kalbinė analizė atlikta taikant Biberio (1988) analizės modelį, o vaizdų tyrimui naudota Kresso ir van Leeuwen (2006) *Vizualinio dizaino gramatika*. Rezultatai rodo, kad nors visos trys redakcijos laikosi bendrų žurnalistikos konvencijų – informacinio tankio, sintaksinio sudėtingumo ir aiškumo – jos skiriasi pasakojimo struktūra, įtikinamumu ir abstraktumu, atspindinčiu jų redakcinę tapatybę. Vaizdinėje analizėje pastebėti skirtumai žvilgsnio kryptingume, kompoziciniame išdėstyme ir reprezentacinėse priemonėse: *The Times* išlaiko institucinį atstumą ir formalumą, *The Guardian* siekia pasakojimo įtaigos ir emocinio įtraukimo, o *The Independent* balansuoja tarp aiškumo ir neutralumo. Tyrimas atskleidžia, kaip multimodalinė žiniasklaidos raiška atspindi ideologinius bei stilistinius skirtumus ir kaip internetinė žurnalistika prisitaiko prie šiuolaikinių auditorijų vizualinių ir tekstinių lūkesčių.

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Appendix 1. *The Independent Sub-Corpus*

1. Starmer under pressure from biggest backers to unpick Brexit after Trump tariffs

As the prime minister grapples with the US trade tariffs, trade unions and business groups are pushing him to negotiate closer ties with the EU

Labour's biggest financial backers are among the loudest voices pressing Sir Keir Starmer to have a much more ambitious approach to his Brexit reset in the wake of Donald Trump unleashing an international trade war by imposing sweeping tariffs.

Trade unions, who were previously divided over Brexit and still provide more than half of Labour's campaign funding, are now at the forefront of a new push for much closer ties with the EU.

Armed with a survey by pollster Peter McLeod – who has carried out research for Labour and the unions – the Trades Union Congress (TUC) has joined with business groups and others to urge Sir Keir to rethink his Brexit red lines.

While the prime minister has insisted he will resist what he calls “a false choice” between the EU and US, the TUC’s public demands are being reflected in private by many in Labour as well.

It follows President Trump imposing a 10 per cent base “reciprocal tariff” on the UK, half of the 20 per cent slapped on the EU. Other countries such as China, South Korea, Japan and Cambodia face tariffs of more than 30 per cent.

But some specific tariffs including 25 per cent on automobile, steel and aluminium products have hit the UK as well putting at least 25,000 jobs at risk in the carmaking sector alone.



Keir Starmer is being urged to forge closer ties with the EU (PA)

TUC general secretary Paul Nowak told The Independent: “The British public agree – they overwhelmingly back a common-sense reset. The Conservatives’ botched Brexit agreement has set workers and business back, at home and abroad.

“It’s time for a new approach that honours the referendum result while giving us a much-needed closer trading relationship with the EU.”

The survey of 5,000 voters for the TUC by Mr McLeod revealed that 66 per cent now want closer ties with the EU.

Even some supporters of pro-Brexit parties want closer ties with the EU – Reform (former Brexit Party) voters now back closer ties with Brussels by 42 per cent to 41 per cent, while Tory voters overwhelmingly back closer ties by 67 per cent to 21 per cent.

The polling also showed that eight in 10 Conservative to Labour switchers at the 2024 general election, and more than half (56 per cent) of Reform-leaning voters (who voted Labour in 2024 but would now vote Reform) support a closer UK-EU relationship. Only 28 per cent opposed closer ties.



Donald Trump insists his sweeping tariffs will make the USA richer (AFP/Getty)

Mr McLeod said: "The new poll confirms that what we heard from those voters also holds nationally by a very strong margin.

"The focus groups help explain why a lot of people feel this way. The dominant view was that Brexit has not been a success and that it would be sensible to try for a better deal. Some of the Leave voters in our groups expressly said that their votes had been a mistake."

Labour MPs are also demanding that the Brexit reset talks set to conclude in a month are made much more ambitious.

Walthamstow MP Stella Creasy, chair of the Labour Movement for Europe, said: "We do five times more business with the European Union than with America. It is in our interest to have a close and stable trading relationship with Europe, but right now, that is up for grabs, too."

A number of other Labour MPs are also voicing demands for a more ambitious approach in private.

One bemoaned Labour's manifesto promise on red lines not to re-enter the single market or customs union.

"We thought we had to keep to the Brexit settlement but actually we could have gone to voters with a much more pro-EU policy," the MP complained.

"We have to unpick Brexit as best we can," added another.

Business groups are also adding their voices to demands of a much closer relationship with the EU in the wake of Lib Dem leader Sir Ed Davey demanding that the UK enters an "economic coalition of the willing" in trade and rejoins the EU's customs union.



Paul Nowak, general secretary of the TUC (PA)

Chris Southworth, secretary general of the International Chamber of Commerce United Kingdom, said: “It is critical the UK shifts gears and moves on from the toxicity of Brexit. We need to quickly adapt to a world that has changed dramatically since 2016.

“The EU is our closest trading partner with 40 per cent of UK trade dependent on the continent. We have much more in common than we have differences when it comes to trade so the economic priority must be to strengthen our relationship with the rest of Europe so we stand strong together to protect our economies from the impact of US tariffs.”

Ben Farrell, chief executive of the Chartered Institute of Procurement and Supply, added: “With all the disruption from tariffs going on it is not unreasonable to think this could push the UK closer to the EU in terms of trade.”

Research carried out for Best for Britain by Frontier Economics shows the government can secure 1.5 per cent growth from a better trade deal with the EU that deepens alignment on goods and services.

Tom Brufatto, director of policy and research at Best for Britain, said: “The most effective course of action isn’t trying to appease the party that is hurting us with tariffs, it’s offsetting that damage by securing a common-sense deal with our closest and more reliable trading partners in Europe.”

But former Tory business secretary Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg is one of a number of senior Brexiteers still disputing the conclusions regarding Mr Trump’s tariffs.

He told *The Independent*: “We are clearly better off outside the EU as we are being affected less by tariffs and crucially are not forced to impose self-harming retaliatory tariffs. Additionally, we save billions each year as we are not subscribing to the EU budget and we are helping our economy by not applying their silly rules. AI is a good current example.”

They still take comfort that the UK got 10 per cent instead of the EU’s 20 per cent.

Mike Galsworthy, chair of the European Movement UK, is pressing for Sir Keir to abandon his red lines altogether with the backing of a large number of MPs.

He said: "The Brexit red lines are utterly obsolete. Everyone knows it and these data show, yet again, that the people of this country care much about the economy than self-flagellating with three self-imposed red lines following a referendum on a different question nine years ago."

2. Trump tariffs: Here's what the UK trades with America

The US is the UK's largest export partner, by far

Donald Trump has imposed 10 per cent tariffs on all of the United Kingdom's exports to the United States.

There are higher tariffs for cars and car parts – 25 per cent – which will also extend to all computer imports, including laptops.

The list includes tariff codes for engines, transmissions, lithium-ion batteries and other major components, along with less expensive parts including tires, shock absorbers, spark plug wires and brake hoses.

Trump says the tariffs are the US's "declaration of independence".

However, UK businesses have labelled them "devastating".

Here is a look at how much trade the UK has with the US, based on figures published by the Office for National Statistics.



U.S. President Donald Trump announces tariffs in the Rose Garden at the White House (REUTERS)

How much is exported and imported?

A total of 15.3 per cent of all goods exported from the UK in 2023 went to the United States, the latest year for which data is available.

This makes the US the UK's largest export partner, with Germany second (8.6 per cent of all UK goods exports), the Netherlands third (7.8 per cent), Ireland fourth (7.1 per cent) and France fifth (6.3 per cent).

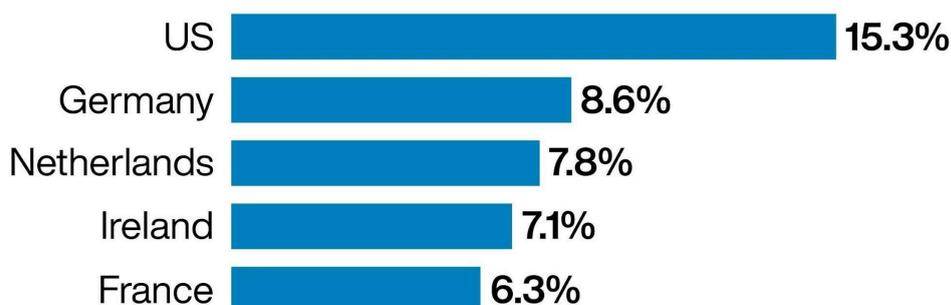
Some 10 per cent of all goods imported to the UK in 2023 came from the US.

This ranks the US as the UK's second largest import partner, behind Germany (responsible for 12.7 per cent of UK goods imports) and ahead of China (9.7 per cent), the Netherlands (9.1 per cent) and France (7.1 per cent).

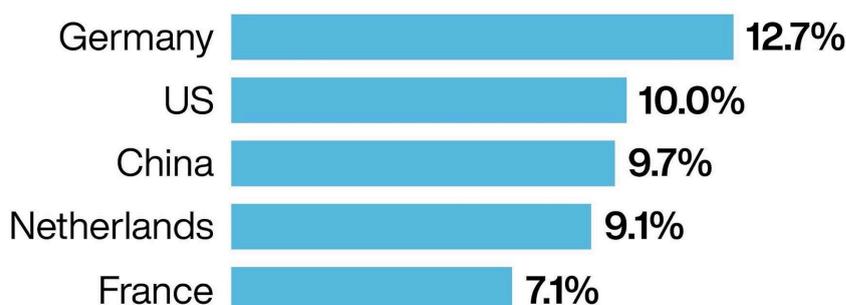
Some £60.4bn of goods were exported from the UK to the US in 2023, while £57.9bn of goods were imported.

UK's top export & import goods partners in 2023

Exports (proportion of total)



Imports (proportion of total)



PA graphic. Source: ONS. US includes Puerto Rico

(PA Graphics)

What is exported?

Of the £60.4bn of goods exported to the US in 2023, machinery and transport equipment accounted for the largest share, at £27.2bn, ahead of chemicals (£14.2bn) and materials (£4.2bn).

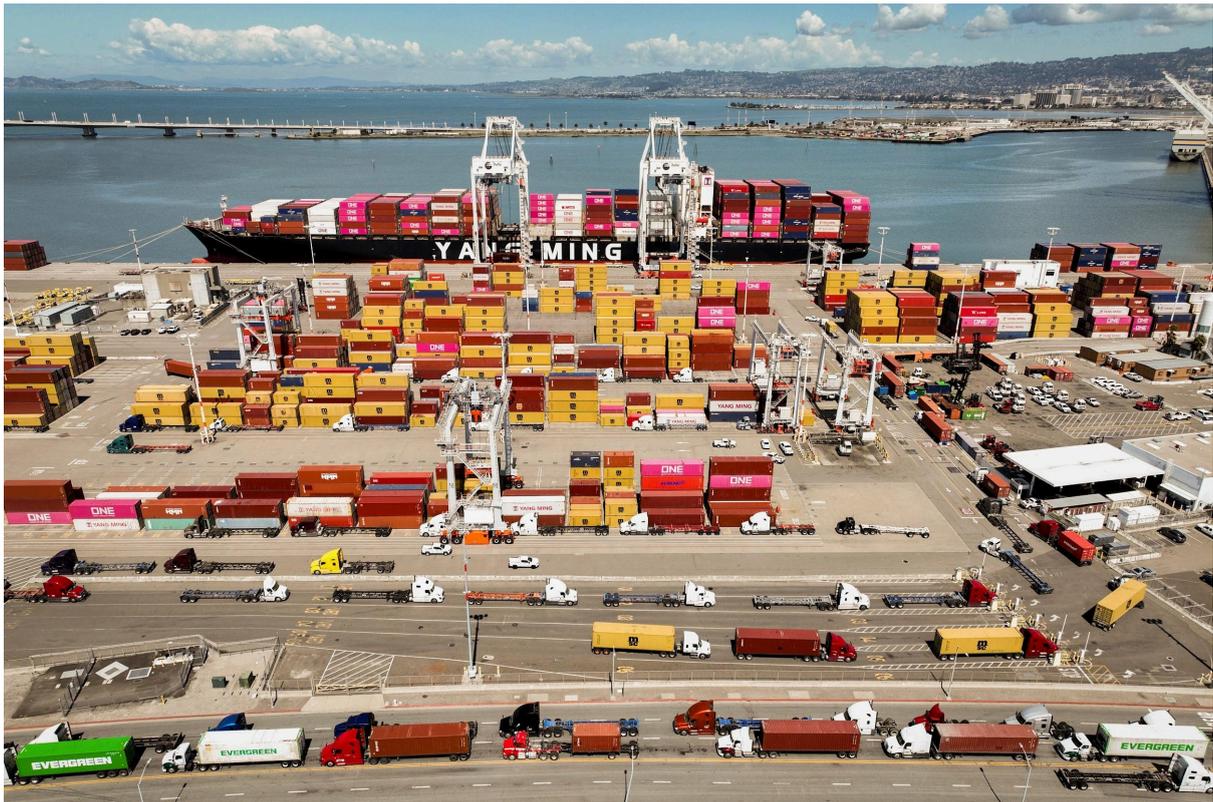
The top commodity exported by value was medicinal and pharmaceutical products, accounting for £8.8bn of US exports, followed by cars (£6.4bn), mechanical power generators for intermediate sale (£5.2bn), organic chemicals (£2.8bn) and scientific instruments for sale as capital goods (£2.8bn).

What is imported?

Machinery and transport equipment also accounted for the largest share of goods imported to the UK from the US in 2023, at £19.9bn, followed by fuel (£18.7bn) and chemicals (£7.8bn).

The number one commodity imported by value was crude oil, accounting for £8.5bn of total goods imports.

Gas was in second place (£6.6bn), followed by intermediate mechanical power generators (£5.5bn), medicinal and pharmaceutical products (£3.8bn) and refined oil (£3.4bn).



A ship docked at the Port of Oakland in California

How dependent is the UK on the US?

Nearly a quarter (23.6 per cent) of all the UK's exports of chemicals went to the US in 2023, with the figure even higher for organic chemicals (27.8 per cent), and medicinal and pharmaceutical products (33.9 per cent).

Other commodities near the top of the list include animal oils and fats (25.8 per cent of all exports), inorganic chemicals (21.6 per cent), cars (18.4 per cent) and aircraft (17.9 per cent).

Overall, 17.1 per cent of the UK's machinery and transport equipment exports in 2023 went to the US, along with 15.9 per cent of exports of beverages and tobacco, 5.2 per cent of exports of food and live animals and 5.1 per cent of exports of fuel.

By contrast, almost a third (31.9 per cent) of all the UK's crude oil imports in 2023 came from the US, with a similar figure for gas (31.2 per cent).

Some 23.5 per cent of all fuel imports in 2023 came from the US.

Commodities where the UK relied on the US for at least a quarter of imports included wood and cork (27.4 per cent of all imports in 2023) and aircraft (26.5 per cent).

Further down the list, the UK depended on the US for 19.2 per cent of its imports of ships and aircraft; 16.7 per cent of its coal, coke and briquettes; 14.6 per cent of its mechanical machinery; 11.2 per cent of its chemicals; 9.2 per cent of its machinery and transport equipment; 3 per cent of its beverages and tobacco; and 1.8 per cent of its food and animals.

3. Global trade war intensifies and shares tumble as China hits back at Trump tariffs

FTSE 100 suffers worst losses since Covid-19 as Starmer weighs British response to fees on imports

Share prices tumbled around the world on Friday – with Britain's FTSE 100 suffering its worst drop since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic – as the global trade war intensified with China's retaliatory imposition of a 34 per cent tariff on imports of all US products.

Trillions of dollars have been wiped from the markets since Donald Trump announced a range of import taxes on goods from other countries. British exports to the US face a blanket 10 per cent levy. Sir Keir Starmer is due to hold talks with world leaders over the weekend, as nations reel from the economic hit and decide whether to reciprocate with tariffs on Washington. The prime minister was yesterday urged not to retaliate by his predecessor Sir Tony Blair, who said that such a move would not be in the UK's "best interests".

Economists warn that escalating the situation could generate a spike in inflation and weaken growth, even triggering recession.

The collapse in share values creates a big dent in many British pension funds, and there are fears that China will respond to the US tariffs by flooding other countries with cheap exports, further harming British firms.

Wall Street saw a second day of bruising losses on Friday, while London's top stock market fell 4.95 per cent to a five-year low – its biggest single-day decline since March 2020.

Downing Street rejected Mr Trump's claim that the British government is "happy" about the 10 per cent rate, which is half of the 20 per cent levy being imposed on European Union members, and much lower than the rate imposed on many other nations.

Aboard Air Force One, Trump told reporters he had had a "very good dialogue" with Sir Keir, adding: "I think he was very happy about how we treated them with tariffs."

But a spokesperson for No 10 was clear, saying "We are disappointed" – and added: "We'll be engaging with international leaders over the weekend... It is a changing, shifting global economic landscape."

Analysts for AJ Bell estimate that about £3.8 trillion has been wiped off the value of the global stock market since Mr Trump's announcement, which he billed as "Liberation Day" for the US economy.

"It caps off a horrible week for financial markets and dragged share prices even lower," said Dan Coatsworth, an investment analyst at AJ Bell. "It's also bad for the world in general, as we now have a repeat of the heightened geopolitical tensions between the US and China that dominated Trump's first term." Mr Coatsworth added that the president's "tactics have caused shockwaves in every corner of the world".

As well as share prices, the value of the US dollar and even gold fell on Friday.

US Federal Reserve chair Jerome Powell described the tariffs, along with their likely economic and inflationary impacts, as "significantly larger than expected" and said they were "highly likely" to lead to "at least a temporary rise in inflation" in the US.

In the stand-off between the US and China, Beijing imposed reciprocal tariffs and announced controls on exports of medium and heavy rare-earths, including samarium, gadolinium, terbium, dysprosium, lutetium, scandium and yttrium, to the US.

In Japan, prime minister Shigeru Ishiba said Mr Trump's tariffs had created a "national crisis" as a plunge in banking shares set Tokyo's stock market on course for its worst week in years.

Investment bank JPMorgan said it now believes there is a 60 per cent chance of the global economy entering recession by the end of the year, up from 40 per cent previously.

EU trade commissioner Maros Sefcovic said he would speak to his US counterparts before responding.

"The EU will respond in a calm, carefully phased, and above all, unified way, as we calibrate our response," he said on social media. "We will not shoot from the hip."

The prime minister has said he is reluctant to make a quick decision on tariffs.

In the House of Commons this week, Liberal Democrat leader Sir Ed Davey urged the prime minister to team up with European and Commonwealth countries to "stand against Trump's tariffs and for free trade".

Sir Keir replied: “I really do think it is not sensible to say the first response should be to jump into a trade war with the US.”

4. Labour grandee Harriet Harman calls on Starmer to ban smartphones in schools

The Labour peer called for a top-down ban on the devices in schools as pressure grows on the PM to crack down on harmful material

Harriet Harman has called on Sir Keir Starmer to ban smartphones in schools, amid mounting pressure on the government to take action to stop tech companies from allowing harmful material on their platforms.

“Is [the prime minister] going to side with parents who are terrified and want this content off their children’s phones, or is he going to accept the tech bros’ resistance to having to make changes?” Baroness Harman asked.

It comes after Sir Keir Starmer hosted a meeting at Downing Street with Adolescence co-writer Jack Thorne and children’s charities on Monday to talk about young boys being influenced by misogyny they encounter online.

Baroness Harman – who was made the new UK special envoy for women and girls last month – said: “I would like to see schools actually told top down from Westminster, ‘You have got to ban the use of smartphones in school time,’ and that would then enable all schools not to have a discussion with their parents or to battle it out. But just to say: ‘This is the ruling.’”

She said she agreed with Kemi Badenoch, who last month announced that the Tories would introduce a full ban on smartphones in schools after admitting guidance issued under former prime minister Rishi Sunak hadn’t worked.

Baroness Harman told the Sky News Electoral Dysfunction podcast: “What parents want is for schools to do a simple rule, and for all schools to do the same simple rule, and for the tech companies to be told: ‘You have got to sort out this issue of the content that’s on children’s phones.’”

The previous Conservative government issued non-statutory guidance to schools in England intended to stop the use of mobile phones during break and lunch periods in schools, as well as in lessons.



Baroness Harman called for a ‘top-down’ approach (Sky News)

But last month, shadow education secretary Laura Trott admitted the guidance “hasn’t worked”.

“Now it is time to make it law,” she said. “When I go into schools, headteachers are asking for this.

“When I go into schools which have these kinds of ban, the pupils love it. They talk about how much safer it makes them feel. They talk about how they have the freedom to learn. They’re not under any pressure to be on their phones responding to apps.

“At a time when we are facing lots of challenges in our education system, introducing something which reduces distraction, encourages reading, helps with behaviour, for me, is an absolute no-brainer.”

While the education secretary, Bridget Phillipson, has previously said smartphones have “no place” in schools, warning of the damage caused by social media and technology, it is understood that Labour has no plans to put in place an outright ban.

Phillipson previously told school and college leaders that they have the government’s “full backing” on removing disruptive phones from classrooms.

Baroness Harman’s comments come amid speculation that online safety legislation could be watered down to secure an agreement with the US that would secure a carve-out for the UK from Trump’s tariffs.

However, the government has insisted that online safety protections for children are “not up for negotiation” in trade talks.

Asked whether the Online Safety Act could be altered, Treasury minister James Murray told Sky News: “It’s really important for us to have those protections for children and vulnerable people online. “Those important protections are not up for negotiation. Those basic protections are things we want to keep.”

5. True scale of welfare cuts ‘closer to £9bn’, experts warn

Experts warn 100,000 more people plunged into poverty by cuts than government previously estimated

Labour's recently announced cuts to welfare spending may be much more severe than the government is claiming, several experts have warned.

The headline £4.8bn figure placed on the cuts conceal their 'true scale', new analysis argues, as ministers continue to rebut criticism of the measures.

The reforms, which largely focused on health and disability benefits, were announced by work and pensions secretary Liz Kendall on 18 March. The following week, chancellor Rachel Reeves revealed the scale of these cuts to be £4.8bn at Labour's spring statement – as independently assessed by the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR).

Announcing the plans, Ms Reeves said: "The Labour Party is the party of work. We believe that if you can work, you should work. But if you can't work, you should be properly supported."

But a new report from the New Economics Foundation (NEF) has found that around £2bn in cuts has gone unstated due to how the OBR has costed the proposals. In its forecast, the spending watchdog takes £1.6bn away from the headline cuts figure to reflect Labour's decision not to continue Conservative proposals to reform the Work Capability Assessment (WCA).



Chancellor Rachel Reeves delivering her spring statement in the Commons (House of Commons) (PA Media)

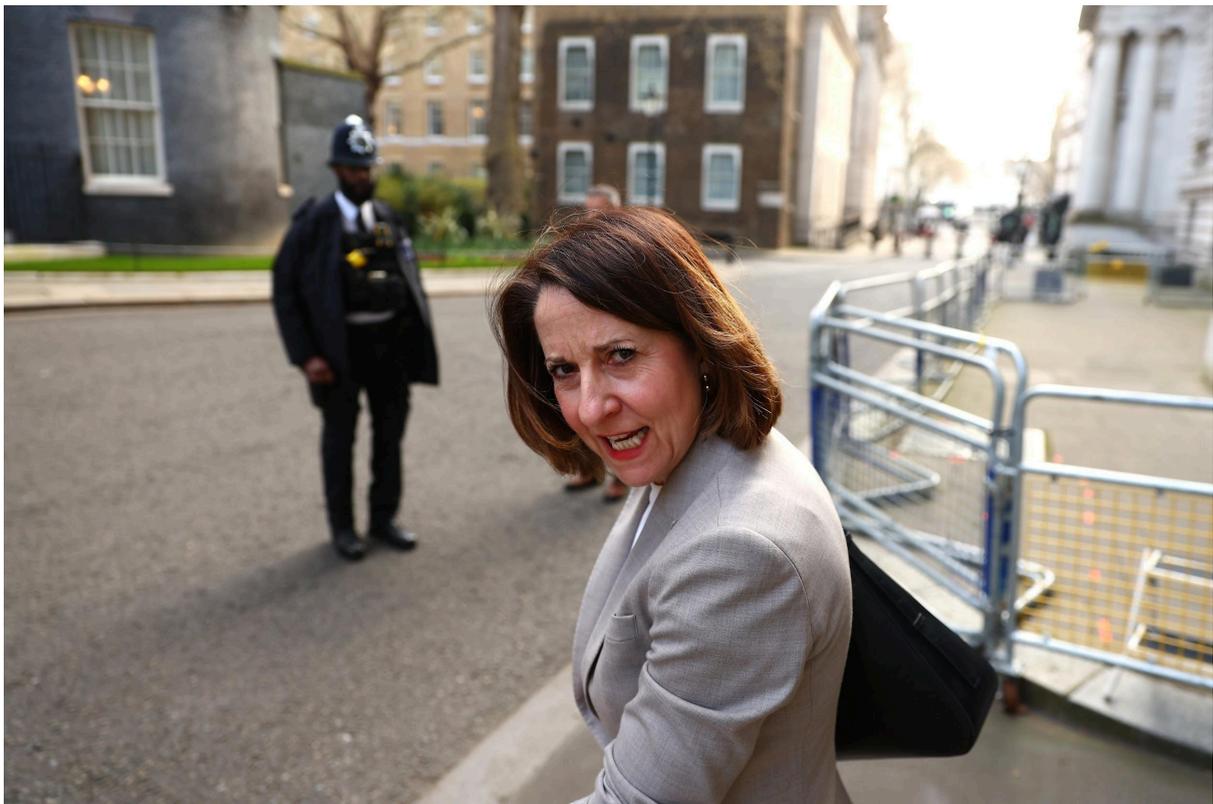
The proposals would have seen it made harder for people to qualify for certain health benefits under the WCA, but Labour instead has decided to scrap it altogether in 2028. Calling this a 'saving' is misleading, the NEF claims, as the change had never happened.

The think tank's report says: "Using this phantom policy to offset the scale and impact of actual cuts happening in the real world is akin to suggesting that you should feel better off because your boss had thought about cutting your wages but then decided against it."

“Rejecting this accounting trick allows us to gain a clearer picture of how ill and disabled people will be affected by the government’s plans,” the NEF’s report adds. Its analysis finds that the true scale of the cuts actually sits at £6.7bn, and the amount of people that will be placed into poverty could be 350,000 – around 100,000 higher than the government’s own estimate.

- ‘I’m terrified’: Disabled benefit claimants on the impact of Labour’s £5 billion cuts to welfare
The bulk of the government’s savings are set to come from changes to the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) which will effectively make it harder to qualify for. Claimed by 3.6 million people, the payment is designed to help people with extra costs incurred by their disability, whether they are working or not.

An analysis by Professor Ben Baumberg Geiger of King’s College London has argued that the OBR’s prediction of how people will respond to these changes only creates more misunderstanding around the scale of the reforms.



Work and pensions secretary Liz Kendall outlined the reforms on 18 March (Getty Images)

The OBR says that while 1.5 million PIP claimants would stand to lose their entitlement to the benefit if Labour’s changes were introduced today, the ‘behavioural response’ will reduce this to around 800,000 people.

This is because, they predict, the greater incentive to score four points on the assessment will cause more people to demonstrate that they qualify and reapply if unsuccessful. The report adds that this is a ‘highly uncertain judgement’.

But factoring this uncertain forecast into the headline figure, Prof Baumberg argues, creates a lack of clarity and transparency around the figures. The welfare expert said: “My guess is that the OBR’s estimates of behavioural effects are too high, and as a result, that the cuts even after accounting for behavioural effects are bigger [than the headline figure].”

“But either way, at this stage where no-one really knows, drawing attention to this assumption is really crucial.”

The headline figure could be as high as £9bn in cuts, Prof Baumberg adds, when also factoring in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

A DWP spokesperson said: “Our reforms will help people into good work and financial independence, with our record £1 billion employment support package breaking down barriers for disabled people. We’re also rebalancing Universal Credit payment levels, so the benefit’s main rate rises permanently above inflation for the first time, in a boost for low-income families.

“We will continue to deliver a social security system for those with severe health conditions and we will protect the income of those who will never be able to work.”

6. Tony Blair urges Starmer not to retaliate against Trump tariffs

Exclusive: In a rare intervention, the former prime minister says it’s not in UK best interests to hit back with its own tariffs

Sir Tony Blair has urged Sir Keir Starmer not to retaliate against Donald Trump’s tariffs, saying such a move wouldn’t be in the UK’s “best interests”.

The prime minister will hold discussions with other international leaders this weekend as the government scrambles to respond to the news that British exports to the US will face a blanket 10 per cent levy, a move that sent global markets tumbling and sparked fears the chancellor’s fiscal headroom could be wiped out.

In a rare intervention, the former PM told students at King’s College London that he supported Sir Keir’s “cool heads” approach to Trump’s ‘Liberation Day’, and he didn’t really understand the intellectual argument behind the tariff policy.

“I don’t think it is in the UK’s best interest to retaliate,” he said, but admitted he did not know where developments over the tariffs would end.



Tony Blair has previously offered advice to Sir Keir Starmer (PA Wire)

Sir Keir will have a series of phone calls with European and Commonwealth leaders, but not Mr Trump, over the weekend, as the world reels from the start of a trade war that on Friday saw China hit back against the US with 34 per cent reciprocal tariffs.

Downing Street also rejected President Trump's claim the Labour leader was "very happy" about Britain's treatment, saying "we are disappointed by the tariffs".

The government has already threatened to hit the US with retaliatory tariffs if a trade deal cannot be struck. Officials are now working through 417 pages of products they could target with taxes, with a list that includes everything from bourbon whiskey to Harley Davidson motorbikes.

But on Friday, a former economic adviser to Chancellor Rachel Reeves warned ministers against putting all their "eggs in this one basket" in hoping a trade deal will help Britain avoid tariffs.

Ex-Treasury minister Lord Jim O'Neill instead said the UK should join with other G7 nations to turn the tables on President Trump.

He warned Sir Keir against "trying to be the US's best friend in the developed world... as there will be no great trade deal with them unless we give them things we have opposed to in past", in a reference to rows over not accepting US chlorinated chicken.

The UK should work with other countries in the G7 group of leading economies, except the US, "on joint tariff reduction between the six of us, especially in services, which is where we have a net edge in global trade," he said.

That, combined with the "boldness and confidence" to borrow to invest, including in major infrastructure to help boost growth, and securing better trade deals and trading relationships with China and India, would allow the UK to "minimise the Trump interference to a self-destruct button" for the US.

Asked about Lord O'Neill's comments, No 10 said: "The prime minister is concentrating on his engagement with our global partners and you will see evidence of that this weekend. But as we've said before, we will be maintaining a cool headed and pragmatic approach, and one that is grounded in our national interest."

Former chancellor Jeremy Hunt also argued against striking back, telling the BBC that British exports to the US are so small a share of US GDP that that "the idea that President Trump will sweat with the threat of British retaliation is for the birds".

He urged Sir Keir to stay true to the UK's history as "one of the world's most open trading economies... that is the best way we can weather this storm we are going through".

Labour mayor of London Sir Sadiq Khan also cautioned against "kneejerk retaliation" saying that acting before trade deal talks become clear risks "cutting off your nose to spite your face. Let's wait and see if we get a trade deal".

Earlier, Ms Reeves said that the government is "determined to get the best deal we can" with talks ongoing.

She said: "Well, of course, we don't want to see tariffs on UK exports, and we're working hard as a government in discussion with our counterparts in the US to represent the British national interest and support British jobs and British industry," the chancellor said on Friday.

"Those conversations are ongoing at the moment, but we're determined to get the best deal we can for our country."

But even with a deal, the global impact of Wednesday's tariffs is expected to cause a significant economic shock to the UK.

The impact of the tariffs could already be felt, with stock markets tumbling around the world. The FTSE 100 fell to a three-month low on Thursday, while in the US, the Dow Jones index suffered its worst day since 2020, falling almost 4 per cent as analysts at Barclays said there was a "high risk that the US economy enters a recession this year".

The Institute of Directors (IOD) said most business leaders were adopting a "wait and see" approach, while others were looking to re-locate activity to the US or trade more with other markets. A snap poll of 562 of its members found a third of bosses, 37 per cent, expect to be hit by the tariffs.

Anna Leach, the IOD's chief economist, said: "With so much uncertainty... it is understandable that businesses will be reluctant to sink time and money into responses which are costly and difficult to reverse. But this will only add to the sluggishness in activity we have seen in the run-up to and since the October Budget announcements, and will further undermine growth."

7. Controversial two-child benefit cap 'plunges extra 30,000 children into poverty since Labour came to power'

Eight anniversary of the welfare limit, brought in by former Tory chancellor George Osborne as one of his austerity measures, this weekend

An extra 30,000 children have been pulled into poverty by the controversial 'two-child limit' on benefits since Labour came to power, according to new research ahead of the eight anniversary of the policy.

Last July ministers said they would consider ditching the "cruel" cap, in a bid to head off a backbench Labour revolt on the issue.

But there has been no movement since, while official documents last week showed that separate moves to slash an extra £5 billion from the welfare bill are set to drive another 50,000 kids into poverty.



Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer (Ben Stansall/PA) (PA Wire)

The cap now affects more than 1.6 million children, by limiting welfare payments to the first two children in most families.

New costings from Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) show another 109 more children are pulled into poverty by the policy every day.

And the number of children affected will continue to increase until 2035 - when the first children born under the turn 18.

The charity says that scrapping the cap would be the most cost-effective way to lift kids out of poverty.

Were the policy to be dumped, 350,000 children would be lifted from poverty at a stroke, it adds. The depth of the poverty experienced by another 800,000 children would be reduced.

Chief executive of the CPAG Alison Garnham said: "Every day the policy forces families to go hungry and damages the life chances of children up and down the country. Reducing the record high levels of child poverty in the UK will require a whole government effort, but abolishing the two-child limit is the essential first step."

Any effort to tackle child poverty will "fall flat on its face" if the two-child limit is not abandoned, she added.

She said that while it would cost around £2 billion, it would be cheaper than other options.

Another possibility, increasing the child element of Universal Credit by £17 a week would cost £3 billion.

CPAG warns that child poverty is at a record high affecting 4.5 million children, up from 3.6 million in 2010/11. The charity also estimates that unless the government takes substantive action, 4.8m children will be in poverty by 2030.

Charities, unions and even former home secretary Suella Braverman have all urged Keir Starmer to dump the cap, brought in as one of former Conservative chancellor George Osborne's austerity measures.

The government is due to publish its new child poverty plan this spring, although the End Child Poverty Coalition has said it believes the document might not come until June.

A government spokesperson said: "No one should be living in poverty, and we know that the best route out of poverty for struggling families is well paid, secure work.

"That is why we are reforming our broken welfare system, so it helps people into good jobs, boosting living standards and putting money in people's pockets.

"Alongside this, our Child Poverty Taskforce is building an ambitious strategy to give all children the best start in life while we increase the Living Wage, uprate benefits, and support 700,000 of the poorest families by introducing a Fair Repayment Rate on Universal Credit deductions to help low-income households."

8. Conservatives should stand aside and let Reform win Runcorn by-election, says senior Tory MP

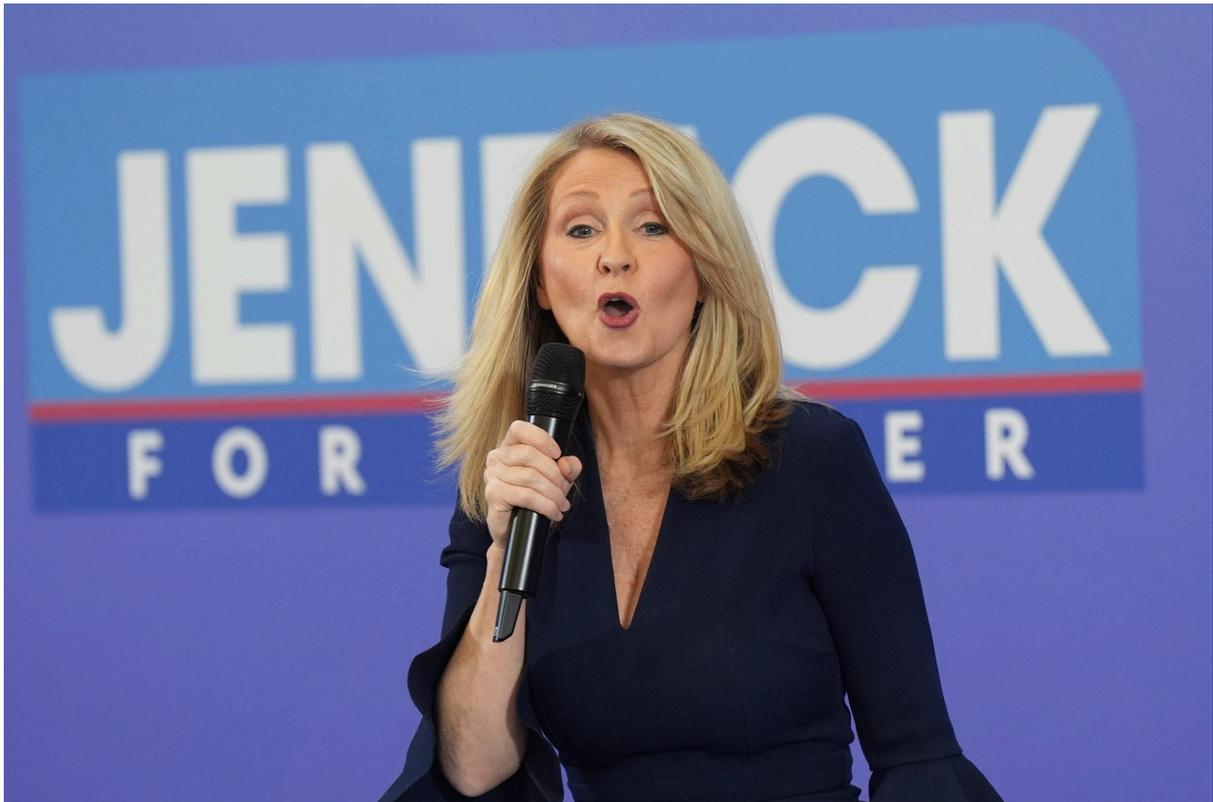
The Runcorn and Helsby by-election next month will see both Reform and the Conservatives attempt to overturn Labour's 15,000 vote majority in the safe seat

The Conservative Party should let Reform UK win the Runcorn by-election next month as part of an "electoral pact" between the two parties, a senior Tory MP has said.

As the Conservatives continue to lag behind in the polls, former Cabinet minister Esther McVey appeared to defy party leader Kemi Badenoch and advocate an alliance with Nigel Farage's party.

It comes just weeks ahead of the Runcorn and Helsby by-election, which will see both Reform and the Conservatives attempt to overturn Labour's 15,000 vote majority in the safe seat. The area has been held by Labour for more than 40 years.

Ms McVey said the by-election was a chance for the Tories to let Reform pick up a victory, with the expectation they would then allow the Tories to do the same elsewhere.



Conservative former minister Esther McVey has suggested her party should stand aside at the Runcorn by-election (Jacob King/PA) (PA Archive)

Reform, the Conservatives and Labour are currently neck-and-neck in national polling, meaning that a pact between two parties could shift the vote significantly.

A leaked recording – seen by the Telegraph – reportedly captured Ms McVey telling the Conservatives’ True Blue Patrons Dinner: “I’m a pragmatist, and I think Conservatives are pragmatists, and when we get to the general election, would I be making, looking at an electoral pact [with Reform]? Absolutely I would.

“We don’t want two right-wing parties cutting our own throats and Labour getting in, which could happen. So we do have to be pragmatic.

“And Phil [Davies] is spot on, I know Nigel [Farage], I know Richard Tice, I know Lee [Anderson], I mean, I know them all very, very well indeed. And I’d sooner say to them, there’s a couple of seats you can get there, that we came a very distant fourth, and you came second. We’ll stay out the way. I want you to win it. And they can do the same for us.”

Asked whether it was a good idea to enter an electoral pact with Reform, the former Cabinet minister referenced the May 1 by-election.

“What you want to do is, like I said, where Ukip came second and we were a very, very distant fourth, like in Runcorn, like where Mike Amesbury punched his constituent. You’d probably say there, ‘Let Reform win that seat’ because you might need them in the southwest, [so] that we win a seat”, she said.



Kemi Badenoch has repeatedly ruled out an electoral pact with Reform UK (PA Wire)

But the Conservatives shut down Ms McVey's remarks, with a spokesperson telling The Independent: "Nigel Farage can't even manage 5 MPs and is more interested in massaging his own ego than providing effective opposition to this dreadful Labour government. He'll always put self-interest over the national interest.

"Under new leadership, the Conservatives are doing the serious work of opposition and will always put our national interest first. Only a vote for the Conservatives on 1st May will deliver better services and lower taxes."

Mrs Badenoch has repeatedly ruled out an electoral pact with Reform UK, saying such a move would drive away Tory voters who did not want to see her "get into bed" with Nigel Farage.

The by-election was called after ex-Labour MP Mike Amesbury resigned after being convicted of assault for punching a constituent.

Polling conducted by Lord Ashcroft, which surveyed a representative sample of 702 adults in the Runcorn and Helsby constituency between March 3 and March 12, predicted that Reform would win 42 per cent of the vote. Meanwhile, Labour is predicted to finish second on 33 per cent of the vote, while the Conservatives are predicted to come third on 11 per cent.

Reform UK and Esther McVey have been contacted for comment.

9. Trump 'acted for his country' with tariff plans, Starmer says

Prime minister vowed to keep 'a cool head' in a sign he won't retaliate against US president's tariffs

Donald Trump was "acting for his country" when he slapped a 10 per cent tariff on all British exports to the United States, Sir Keir Starmer has said.

The prime minister vowed to act in Britain's interests in return, but indicated he would not hit back with retaliatory measures and instead would "keep a cool head".

As he met business leaders to discuss the measures in Downing Street, Sir Keir warned: "Clearly, there will be an economic impact from the decisions the US has taken, both here and globally."



Keir Starmer is seeking to strike a deal with Donald Trump (PA Wire)

But he said: "I want to be crystal clear: we are prepared, indeed one of the great strengths of this nation is our ability to keep a cool head."

The PM added: "Last night the President of the United States acted for his country, and that is his mandate.

"Today, I will act in Britain's interests with mine."

The PM said "nothing is off the table" in terms of Britain's response to Mr Trump's plans, but said "our intention remains to secure a deal".

He said that "we are living in a changing world... entering a new era".

Sir Keir added: "We must rise to this challenge and that is why I've instructed my team to move further and faster on the changes I believe will make our economy stronger and more resilient.



Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer said the UK will keep a ‘cool head’ in reaction to US tariffs (Jack Taylor/PA) (PA Wire)

"Because this Government will do everything necessary to defend the UK's national interest, everything necessary to provide the foundation of security that working people need to get on with their lives.

"That is how we have acted and how we will continue to act: with pragmatism, cool and calm heads, focused on our national security."

Mr Trump has said his “Liberation Day” announcement, which threatens a devastating global trade war, is a “declaration of economic independence”.

European Union nations face 20 per cent penalties while China will pay 34 per cent and Cambodia an eye-watering 49 per cent. Switzerland was also hit hard with 31 per cent. Taiwan, which is struggling for survival against threats from China, faces 32 per cent and India is getting 26 per cent.



President Donald Trump speaks during an event to announce new tariffs in the Rose Garden at the White House (AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein) (AP)

Sir Keir’s comments came after his business secretary insisted that “America is a friend” despite the damaging levy. Australian PM Anthony Albanese lashed out at Mr Trump following the tariff announcement, saying it was “not the act of a friend”.

But asked about the remarks on Sky News, Jonathan Reynolds said: “America is a friend, America is our principal ally.

Our relationship is an incredibly strong economic one, but also a security one and a political one as well.”

Mr Reynolds will continue efforts to strike a trade deal with the US which could see Mr Trump’s tariffs on British exports lifted.

After days of build up the US president waited for markets to close to make his big announcement in the Rose Garden of the White House on what he has dubbed “liberation day”.

He was surrounded by his cabinet, members of the Congress, senators, automobile workers and farmers as he promised “to make America wealthy again”.

He said: “April 2nd 2025 will forever be remembered as the day American industry was reborn. America's destiny was reclaimed and the day that we began to make America wealthy again. For decades, our country has been looted, pillaged, raped and plundered by nations near and far, both friend and foe alike.

“Americans really suffered gravely. They watched in anguish as foreign leaders have stolen our jobs, foreign cheaters have ransacked our factories and foreign scavengers that have torn apart our once beautiful American dream.

“Our country and its taxpayers have been ripped off for more than 50 years, but it is not going to happen anymore.”

10. No escape for UK as Trump targets ‘foreign cheaters’ in new global trade war

Keir Starmer urges ‘calm’ as Donald Trump reveals that UK companies face a 10 per cent tariff from 0500 GMT

British firms have been hit by a 10 per cent tariff on all exports to the United States as Donald Trump ushered in a new era for global trade and pledged America “will no longer be ripped off”.

The US president said his “Liberation Day” announcement – in which some nations will pay as much as 34 per cent – was a “declaration of economic independence”.

It means that Sir Keir Starmer’s government has failed to secure a carve-out for Britain from tariffs, but while the UK was 13th on a “naughty list” of nations brandished at a White House press conference, it had the joint lowest tariffs along with nations such as Brazil.

European Union nations face 20 per cent penalties while China will pay 34 per cent and Cambodia an eye-watering 49 per cent. Switzerland was also hit hard with 31 per cent. Taiwan, which is struggling for survival against threats from China, faces 32 per cent and India is getting 26 per cent.

A Downing Street source said: “We don’t want any tariffs at all, but a lower levy than others vindicates our approach. It matters because the difference between 10 per cent and 20 per cent is thousands of jobs.

“We will keep negotiating, keep cool and keep calm. We want to negotiate a sustainable trade deal, and of course to get tariffs lowered. Tomorrow we will continue with that work.”



Donald Trump with a list of countries that will be subject to ‘reciprocal tariffs’ (AP)

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“Our country and its taxpayers have been ripped off for more than 50 years, but it is not going to happen anymore.”

At one point the president introduced an automobile worker onto the stage to talk about how car plants in the state of Michigan had been forced to close because of foreign competition.

The president listed a series of grievances noting that tariffs on cars in South Korea and Japan prevented the US from entering the market. He complained of 20 per cent VAT taxes on sales in the EU which also applied to Britain. And he claimed dairy products to Canada were getting hit by tariffs of more than 200 per cent.



Keir Starmer and Donald Trump in the Oval Office in February (PA)

While the UK got little mention, apart from a reference on his list, it is still getting the base level of 10 per cent tariffs, although that is half the level it would have had if it was still in the EU.

Ministers knew it would be impossible to avoid the measures after Mr Trump made it clear that he was imposing tariffs on cars. Around 17 per cent of UK cars go to the US market and already the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) has estimated it will cost Britain 25,000 jobs in the automobile sector..

Mr Trump has claimed his new tariff regime will “rebalance trade” with the US and “stop countries taking advantage” of his country.

He had already announced that he would impose 25 per cent tariffs on all automobiles, steel and aluminium imports to America which included the UK.

Business secretary Jonathan Reynolds made it clear there would be no knee jerk response.

He said: “We have a range of tools at our disposal and we will not hesitate to act. We will continue to engage with UK businesses including on their assessment of the impact of any further steps we take.

“Nobody wants a trade war and our intention remains to secure a deal. But nothing is off the table and the government will do everything necessary to defend the UK’s national interest.”

Earlier the prime minister resisted calls for him to turn his back on America and concentrate on rebuilding relationships with the EU as the main trading partner.

During PMQs Liberal Democrat leader Sir Ed Davey urged the prime minister to join other nations in an "economic coalition of the willing" to respond to the US tariffs.



Trump during his hour-long announcement in the Rose Garden at the White House on Wednesday (AP)

But Sir Keir described Sir Ed's proposal as "a false choice" and insisted that he would not abandon hopes of a trade deal with the US.

He told MPs: "A trade war is in nobody's interests and the country deserves – and we will take – a calm, pragmatic approach."

Tina McKenzie, policy chair of the Federation of Small Businesses, said: "Tariffs will cause untold damage to small businesses trying to trade their way into profit while the domestic economy remains flat."

Conservative shadow trade secretary, Andrew Griffith, said: "Labour failed to negotiate with President Trump's team for too many months after the election, failed to keep our experienced top trade negotiator, and failed to get a deal to avoid the imposition of these tariffs by our closest trading partner."

11. Extra 400,000 people to be signed off as unfit for work under Labour's welfare reforms, government admits

Work and Pensions Secretary Liz Kendall has insisted the changes are needed to fix the 'broken' system left by the last Conservative government

An extra 400,000 people could be signed off as unfit for work under Labour's controversial welfare reforms, the government's own figures show.

Work and Pensions Secretary Liz Kendall declared ministers were being “ambitious for our people and our country” as she announced plans to slash £5bn from the benefits bill earlier this month. Alongside the cuts, she pledged changes to the system designed to get the long-term sick back into work.



(AP)

But the government’s own analysis of the impact of the changes show far more people will receive the top level of incapacity benefit by 2030 than previously thought.

This is because ministers scrapped Conservative plans that would have resulted in more of those with mobility and mental health problems looking for work.

Labour insists that their changes will ultimately get people back to work, once the impact of their £1bn employment support programme kicks in.

However, the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) has warned it has seen no evidence of how the reforms will boost employment.

The cuts to the welfare budget have prompted fury among many Labour MPs.

But Ms Kendall has insisted that they are necessary to fix a “broken” benefits system her party inherited from the last Tory government.

As part of her plans, she reduced the top rate of incapacity benefits for those deemed unfit for any work, saying the move was necessary to take away “perverse financial incentives that the Tories created, which actively encourage people into welfare dependency”.

Official estimates last autumn suggested their number would increase to 2.6 million by 2030 if nothing was done.

However, updated estimates in an impact assessment finally released last week show numbers will rise to 3 million by the end of the decade, despite the reforms which will halve the payment for new claimants.

Government sources told The Times, which first reported the story, that the main reason for the rise was that ministers had reversed planned changes to the work capability assessment, through which people qualify for incapacity benefits.

These would have required more people with mobility and mental health problems to take steps to prepare for work.

The OBR has previously estimated it would have meant around 450,000 fewer people in the top category of incapacity benefit by 2030, The Times reported.

Mel Stride, the shadow chancellor, said: “It takes a particular level of incompetence to bring forward a welfare reform plan which leaves more people on out of work benefits and fewer people in work, according to the official forecasts.

“Labour inherited reforms which would have seen hundreds of thousands fewer people on long-term benefits where there are no requirements to take steps towards work. They have scrapped those principled reforms and instead chosen to rush through cuts to disability benefits designed purely to save the chancellor from breaking her fiscal rules.”

12. Regulation and technology can help combat spread of online misogyny, expert says

Online safety expert Lina Ghazal said shows like *Adolescence* ‘shine a light on the devastating impact’ the spread of online hate can have on children.

Regulation and technology can help online platforms combat extreme views and misogynistic attitudes but sites have taken a “hands-off approach” to content for “too long”, an online safety expert has said.

Lina Ghazal said TV shows like Netflix drama *Adolescence* “shine a light on the devastating impact” the spread of such content can have on young people.

On Monday, the Prime Minister hosted *Adolescence* writer Jack Thorne and producer Jo Johnson at Downing Street, alongside representatives from the NSPCC and Children’s Society, where he said he wanted to talk about “what can we do as a society to stop and prevent young boys being dragged into this whirlpool of hatred and misogyny”.

Netflix said it would make the series free to stream for all secondary schools across the UK.

The TV drama, which examines so-called incel (involuntary celibate) culture, has prompted a national conversation about online safety.

Sir Keir Starmer said he had watched the show with his family and had not found it easy viewing.

He said the online world and social media means “ideology” can be “pumped directly into the minds of our children”, and there may not be a single response to adequately address the issue of misogyny, which he said is “much bigger” than just an online problem, and “almost a cultural issue”.

Ms Ghazal, the head of regulatory and public affairs at online safety provider Verifymy, who has previously worked at both Meta and Ofcom, said she agreed with Sir Keir’s assessment, but said new online safety laws and the growing use of technology in content moderation could play a key role in combating the issue, and it was also time for social media sites to step up.

“For too long, many online platforms have taken a hands-off approach to user content and behaviour, allowing extremist views and misogynistic attitudes to proliferate. Shows like *Adolescence* shine a light on the devastating impact this can have on young people,” she told the PA news agency.

“As the Prime Minister says, there is no single solution to the issue but regulation and technology can ensure sites become weaker breeding grounds for harmful content – and that children are less likely to see it.

“The Online Safety Act is a step in the right direction, and Ofcom has now a key role to play in enforcing it, cracking down on deepfake abuse, non-consensual image sharing, and extreme adult content that normalises violence.

“The recommendations of the recent independent porn review should further strengthen these efforts.

“AI-driven content moderation combined with human oversight can also prevent harmful content from being published in the first place, while innovative age assurance technology, such as email-based or facial age estimation, plays a key role in triggering safeguarding measures for young online users.

“Now, platforms must use this technology to uphold their duty of care.”

The Online Safety Act, which is gradually coming into force throughout this year, requires online platforms to follow codes of practice set out by Ofcom.

The codes dictate how platforms must stop users, and in particular children, from encountering harmful content online – including by having clear safety policies, using content moderation and reporting tools, and designing safety features to protect users.

Regulator Ofcom can impose large fines for sites found to be in breach, and in extreme cases ask a court to block access to a platform.

13. UK to work with allies and social media to tackle people smuggling adverts

A new agreement will see nations and social media giants work more closely together to tackle criminal gangs using online platforms to advertise.

The UK has pledged further action with allies and social media platforms to tackle people smuggling adverts online as part of efforts to cut small boat crossings and other illegal migration services.

A new agreement made at the UK’s Organised Immigration Crime Summit on Tuesday will see the UK, US, Albania, Sweden, Tunisia and Vietnam take more collective action to target criminal gangs advertising illegal migration online, and share more data on the issue.

The agreement will also see governments work with social media companies – including Meta, TikTok and X, who were present at the summit – to design out methods being used by criminal gangs to advertise and glorify their people smuggling activities online.

The Home Office said 18,000 social media accounts used to sell spaces on small boats have been taken down by the National Crime Agency (NCA) since last July – 10,000 more than the previous year – but that further action is still needed.

As part of the new collective action agreement, governments will work with online platforms to help improve detection and moderation tools for identifying content linked to people smuggling.

Border Security Commander Martin Hewitt said: “Criminal gangs are exploiting online platforms to prey on vulnerable people, luring them into dangerous and illegal journeys that undermine our border security.

“This international agreement is a vital step in shutting down their online operations and dismantling their networks across the world.

“These organised crime groups operate across borders, which is why the UK has united with five nations to take decisive action – strengthening intelligence-sharing and taking away platforms that these criminals depend on for their business.

“Under the Government’s Plan for Change, we will continue working with global partners to dismantle smuggling networks, bring perpetrators to justice, and protect vulnerable people from falling into their hands.”

The summit has also seen nations agree to increased intelligence-sharing, including between law enforcement agencies, while the UK is to lead work on investigating how criminal gangs are using online spaces.

Graeme Biggar, director-general of the NCA, said: “Yesterday we saw law enforcement from over 40 nations come together in a shared endeavour to stop these criminal gangs.

“We have explored challenges, sought solutions, and reinforced our shared commitment to tackling the threat and harm caused by people smuggling.

“International intelligence-sharing and co-operation is absolutely crucial to track criminal activity across borders, allowing us to put a stop to these dangerous criminals, and this summit has ensured that we can build on our work to put a stop to these gangs, protect our borders and save lives.”

14. Starmer ‘offers US tech firms tax cut’ in last-ditch bid to dodge Trump tariffs

PM scrambles to strike a deal to lift the US president’s tariffs on Britain as soon as possible

Sir Keir Starmer has reportedly offered big US tech companies a major tax break in a last-ditch bid to dodge Donald Trump’s damaging tariffs.

The prime minister is prepared to lower the rate of the government’s digital services tax (DST) in a bid to win concessions from the president as a global trade war looms, it has emerged.

It comes after a scramble in government to strike a deal with the US ahead of what Mr Trump has dubbed “liberation day”, with the president set to impose tariffs of up to 20 per cent on all imports to the US.

The PM conceded this week that an agreement would not be reached before the tariffs take effect, but his business secretary Jonathan Reynolds has said the UK could be the first country to do a deal with Washington on a carve-out from the levies.

There is reportedly a deal on the table ready to be signed, covering areas such as artificial intelligence and other future technologies. But The Guardian on Wednesday also reported the UK has offered significant changes to the DST. The move would reportedly see Britain lower the headline rate of the tax, in a major boost to major American firms such as Amazon, Facebook owner Meta and Google owner Alphabet, while at the same time applying the levy to companies from other countries.



The Government still hopes to secure a carve-out from Donald Trump’s sweeping tariffs (Carl Court/PA) (PA Wire)

It would mean no tax income would be lost from the levy overall, with the DST currently raising £800m a year.

Downing Street is also offering to change the tariffs that it imposes on American exports of chicken, beef and other meats, according to The Daily Telegraph, in a move which could further inflame tensions between Labour and farmers already furious at Sir Keir's inheritance tax changes.

The Liberal Democrats urged Sir Keir to "work with our allies and stand up to Donald Trump". Treasury spokesman Daisy Cooper warned: "Cutting taxes for US social media giants would be an insult to people with disabilities and carers seeing their support slashed by this government."



Rachel Reeves's spring statement could already be in jeopardy if Donald Trump implements his threatened tariffs (PA Wire)

"Rewarding a bully means he will only come back for more."

Chancellor Rachel Reeves discussed the impending tariffs with her counterpart in Washington, Scott Bessent, on Monday. She then warned the Cabinet on Tuesday the measures will damage the UK economy, as talks were ongoing to find a carve-out.

One study estimated a trade war sparked by Mr Trump's tariffs could cost the world £1.1 trillion. And think tank the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) warned that 25,000 jobs are at risk in the UK car manufacturing industry alone, with Mr Trump planning 25 per cent tariffs on all automotive imports to the US.

Education secretary Bridget Phillipson on Wednesday warned Britain is "entering a challenging period" and said a trade war with the US would be in no one's interests.



Bridget Phillipson said the UK is in a 'strong position' (Getty Images)

But she repeated the government's insistence that all options are on the table in terms of retaliatory tariffs and other responses. She told Times Radio: "A trade war would be in no one's interest. So the approach that we're taking as a government is one that is calm and pragmatic.

"There won't be any knee-jerk reactions from this government. We will reserve all our options in terms of the responses that are available to us. But our focus at the moment is on continuing those discussions and seeking to get a good deal that's in the national interest."

Mr Trump's tariffs will be unveiled on Wednesday night at a Rose Garden event titled "Make America Wealthy Again".

The Treasury was contacted for comment.

15. Marine Le Pen brought the far right to France's front door

For years, Marine Le Pen stood at the gates of power — poised, relentless and rising

For years, Marine Le Pen stood at the gates of power — poised, relentless and rising. She stripped the French far right of its old symbols, sanded down its roughest edges and built in its place a sleek, disciplined machine with the single goal of winning the country's presidency.

In 2022, she came closer than anyone thought possible, winning more than 40% of the vote in the runoff against Emmanuel Macron. The Élysée Palace seemed within reach.

Now her political future may lay in ruins. On Monday, a French court convicted Le Pen of embezzling European Union funds and barred her from holding office for five years. The sentence may have done more than just potentially remove her from the next presidential race. It may have ended the most sustained far-right bid for power in Western Europe since World War II — surpassed only, in outcome, by Italy's prime minister, Giorgia Meloni.

But the political earthquake Le Pen set in motion will rumble for years to come.

A family inheritance — reforged

Le Pen was born in 1968 into a family already on the fringes of French politics. In 1972, her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, founded the National Front party rooted in racism, antisemitism and a yearning for France's lost empire.

She was just 8 years old when a bomb destroyed the family's apartment in Paris in what was widely seen as an assassination attempt on her father. No one was seriously hurt, but the blast marked her for life. She has said it gave her a lasting sense that her family was hated, and that they would never be treated like other people.

As a young woman, she studied law, became a defense attorney and learned how to argue her way through hostile rooms. In politics, she didn't wait her turn. In 2011, she wrested control of the party from her father. In 2015, she expelled him after one of his Holocaust-denying tirades.

She renamed the party the National Rally. She replaced leather-jacketed radicals with tailored blazers and talking points. She talked less about race, more about the French way of life. She warned of "civilizational threats," called for bans on headscarves and promised to put French families first.

Her tone changed. Her message didn't.

In one of her sharpest political maneuvers, she sought out a group long despised by her father: the LGBTQ community. Le Pen filled her inner circle with openly gay aides, skipped public protests against same-sex marriage and framed herself as a protector of sexual minorities against "Islamist danger."

Critics called it "pinkwashing" — a cosmetic tolerance masking deeper hostility. But it worked. A surprising number of gay voters, especially younger ones, started backing her. Many saw strength, clarity and the promise of order in a world spinning too fast.

From the fringe to the front line

She ran for president three times: 2012, 2017 and 2022. Each time, she climbed higher. In her final campaign, she was confident, calm and media savvy. She leaned into her role as a single mother, posed with her cats and repeated her calls for "national priority." She no longer shocked. She convinced.

Behind her stood a constellation of far-right leaders cheering her on: Hungary's Viktor Orbán, Italy's Matteo Salvini, the Netherlands' Geert Wilders. They saw in her not only an ally, but a leader. Her mix of cultural nationalism, social media fluency and calculated restraint became a blueprint.

"Marine Le Pen posts pictures of her cat, talks about being a mother. But when it comes to policy, there's no softening," said Pierre Lefevre, a political consultant in Paris. "It makes extreme positions seem more palatable, even to people who might otherwise be put off."

When she lost in 2022, she didn't vanish. She regrouped, stayed present in parliament and prepared for 2027. Polls had her leading. Macron cannot run again.

Then came Monday's verdict.

The fall

The court found that Le Pen had siphoned millions of euros in public funds while serving in the European Parliament, paying party staff with money intended for EU assistants. Prosecutors described it as deliberate and organized. The court agreed.

She was sentenced to two years of house arrest, fined €100,000 (\$108,200) and banned from holding public office for five years. She said she would appeal. The house arrest sentence will be suspended during the appeal, but the ban on holding office takes effect immediately.

Her allies erupted in outrage. Orbán declared, "Je suis Marine" — I am Marine. Salvini called the ruling "a declaration of war by Brussels." In Paris, her supporters called it political persecution. Her opponents fist-pumped in the streets.

A changed political landscape

Even in disgrace, Le Pen remains one of the most consequential political figures of her time. She took a name that once evoked hatred and transformed it into a serious vehicle for national leadership. She made the far right electable. She blurred the line between fringe and power.

Her party, the National Rally, became the largest last year in France's lower house of parliament. Her handpicked successor, 29-year-old Jordan Bardella, now leads it. He is polished and popular, but he lacks broad political experience and name recognition.

Whether Le Pen returns after her ban, fades into silence or reinvents herself again, her mark is permanent. She forced mainstream rivals to adapt to her language. She turned fear into votes and redefined what was politically possible in a republic once seen as immune to extremism.

She never became president, but she changed the race and the rules.

16. Most parents of 11 to 16-year-olds say child has internet in bedroom – survey

Three quarters of the parents questioned said they are concerned about what their children are seeing, hearing or doing online.

More than three-quarters of parents of 11-16 year olds said their child has a screen with internet access in their bedroom, according to a survey carried out in the wake of hit Netflix drama *Adolescence*.

The show's co-writer and actor, Stephen Graham, has spoken about how children "can be looking at all kinds of things" nowadays with internet in their bedrooms, compared with a generation before.

Smartphones are the most common devices, followed by tablets and desktop computers or laptops, the exclusive snapshot survey by Ipsos for the PA news agency showed.

Three quarters of the parents questioned said they are concerned about what their children are seeing, hearing or doing online, and 87% said they are not confident they know what content they are viewing.

Asked if their child has a computer or any other screens with access to the internet that they use in their bedroom, 65% of parents said yes.

A total of 622 parents aged 23-65 with a child or children aged between five and 16 in Great Britain were questioned online by Ipsos for PA last week.

The proportion saying their child has a screen with internet access in their bedroom rose to 78% for parents with a child aged between 11 and 16.

Graham, in interviews after the show's runaway success, has spoken about the huge differences now in what children can do in their bedrooms if they have internet access.

He previously told BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme that in his own childhood when he went to his room he could "maybe draw some pictures or I had a Casio little keyboard, we send our kids to their rooms today and the possibilities are endless, especially with the connection to the internet, and they can be looking at all kinds of things."

When it comes to their children's safety online, 5% of parents said they do not take any specific protective measures, the survey showed.

Most (61%) said they have had discussions with their children about the risks of online activity, while more than half (55%) said they have parental controls or apps on devices.

About four in 10 (45%) said they restrict when or where their child can use the internet, while a fifth (22%) said they have removed devices from their child when they have had concerns.

Just under a fifth (17%) of parents said they have removed a device from their child's bedroom.

About six in 10 (61%) of parents said television shows or documentaries about child safety online are likely to prompt them to take extra protective measures, while most (73%) said their children getting older is the main reason for them to put in place additional safety measures.

On smartphones, most parents (about 80%) questioned said they think children should be at least 11 years old before having one for their own personal use.

One in 10 said a child should be 16, while 3% of parents felt seven or eight was an acceptable age.

More than half (54%) said they would support a complete ban on smartphones in schools, while almost a fifth (19%) have confiscated their child's phone to prevent them taking it to school.

More than a quarter (28%) have told their child not to take their phone to school.

Last week the head of the schools watchdog Ofsted said smartphones should be banned in schools in England.

Last year, under the former Conservative government, schools in England were given non-statutory guidance intended to stop the use of mobile phones during the school day.

In an exchange at Prime Minister's Questions last week Sir Keir Starmer said a change to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to require schools to ban the use of phones was "completely unnecessary", when challenged by Conservative leader Kemi Badenoch on the issue.

The PM claimed "almost every school" already bans phones, and instead said the focus should be on the content children were consuming.

The NSPCC said the survey response "echoes what we hear consistently through our helpline; parents who are concerned about what their children are viewing on devices, in particular on smartphones, be it at school, when out with their friends and when alone in their bedroom".

Matthew Sowemimo, the children's charity's head of policy for child safety online, said: "While we believe the online world has a vital role to play in young people's lives, too often the devices they use are serving children harmful and abuse content via social media that can have a detrimental impact on their wellbeing."

He said tech companies have "dragged their heels when it comes to children's safety online" and urged them to "invest in effective enforcement of existing age restrictions, better safety-by-design principles and advice for parents and young people to ensure they can use all devices without fear of harm".

17. Pharmacies to provide more frontline health services after £3bn funding boost

After a year of negotiations between pharmacies and Tory and Labour governments, health minister Stephen Kinnock described the new deal as an important step in fixing 'a broken pharmacy sector'

A deal worth hundreds of millions has finally broken a year-long deadlock between the government and community pharmacies over providing key health services across England.

Ministers hope that it will allow pharmacists to deal with many medical issues and, as a result, free up GP time for more serious problems, although the National Pharmacy Association (NPA) warned the funding fell a "long way short of the NHS's own estimates" of the true cost of providing pharmacy services.

Speaking exclusively to The Independent, health minister Stephen Kinnock described the contract agreed between the government and Community Pharmacy England as an important step to fixing "a broken pharmacy sector".



Health minister Stephen Kinnock (Stefan Rousseau/PA)

He praised The Independent's coverage of the pharmacy crisis highlighting "a tsunami of closures".

The deal will mean that the morning-after pill for women will be free of charge across the whole country for the first time in history, ending the postcode lottery.

Pharmacies have been threatening to work to rule over funding. Added to that, late last year the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) revealed there were 1,200 fewer pharmacies than in 2017.

With a growing crisis in pharmacy provision in England, the previous Community Pharmacy Contractual Framework (CPCF) ran out in March last year, but Rishi Sunak's Tory government had been unable to agree a new one before the election.

After nine months of further talks, Sir Keir Starmer's government finally agreed a deal worth an extra £617m over two years following a six-week consultation with the organisation.

On top of this, the government is writing off £193m of debt for community pharmacy owners to give them confidence going into the new financial year on 1 April.

Nick Kaye, chairman of the NPA, told the PA news agency: "After a decade of 40 per cent cuts to their funding that has left the pharmacy network on its knees, it is good to see a concrete sign that ministers want to support pharmacies.

"No one wants to reduce services through protest action so we'll look carefully at the detail and consult our members, who are facing substantial cost increases from April 1, to understand what this means for the future of their services so we can recommend next steps.

"The government inherited an intolerable situation after more than a decade of real-terms cuts and today's settlement is a step forward. However, the truth is that because of a decade of neglect, it also falls a long way short of the NHS's own estimates of the true cost of providing pharmacy services."

Mr Kinnock who led the talks hailed the breakthrough for providing certainty and being a key part in tackling health provision in England.

He told The Independent: “Today marks an important next phase for our vital community pharmacies and the millions of Independent readers that rely on them every day. We’re committing a record £3bn to help patients access vital new services in convenient locations closer to home.

“This important investment is backed by crucial reforms delivering real benefits for patients. It’s all part of our ambitious drive to move care away from overloaded hospitals and into our communities, making it easier for people to get the support they need right on their local high street.

“It means that, from later this year, women will be able to get the morning-after pill free of charge over the counter for the first time, ending the postcode lottery of access and charges of up to £30.”

He noted that patients on newly prescribed antidepressants will have better access to important follow-up care as a result of the deal, improving their chances of recovery and, in many cases, getting back into work whilst also easing pressure on GP surgeries.

He added: “People needing treatment for a range of common conditions will find it easier to get help on their local high street.

“But, importantly, it is a first step on our mission to revive a vital cornerstone of community healthcare left on the brink of collapse by a decade of underfunding and neglect.”



Community pharmacies will play a major role in healthcare under the new contract (Julien Behal/PA) He claimed that Labour “inherited a broken pharmacy sector as laid bare by The Independent over previous years. Closures have been rife, patients forgotten, and pharmacy owners left buried in red tape and bureaucracy.

“But since taking office, we have been working to turn that situation around. We’re shifting the focus of healthcare out of hospitals and back into the community through our Plan for Change to rebuild the health service and improve living standards for everyone across the country. We’ve started by resetting the government’s relationship with community pharmacies, delivering today the first funding package approved by the sector in over three years.”

Mr Kinnock insisted: “We are determined to continue working closely with our pharmacists as they deliver more services for patients, freeing up GP appointments and cutting NHS waiting times.”

The investment comes alongside reforms to deliver a raft of patient benefits, as part of the government's agenda to shift the focus of care from hospitals into the community, so people can more easily access care and support on their high streets.

The greater range of services provided is not only meant to improve access for patients but also cut waiting lists by reducing the need for people to see their GPs. Other measures include:

- Making the morning-after pill available free of charge at pharmacies on the NHS for the first time ever, ending the postcode lottery women face in accessing the medicine and reducing inequalities.
- Offering patients suffering depression convenient support at pharmacies when they are prescribed antidepressants, to boost mental health support in the community.
- Cutting red tape and bureaucracy to give patients easier access to consultations, with more of the pharmacy team able to deliver a wider number of services, such as medicines and prescriptions advice, Pharmacy First services, and carrying out blood pressure checks.
- Boosting financial incentives for pharmacists to identify patients with undiagnosed high blood pressure and take pressure off GPs.
- Boosting funding for medicine supply so patients have better access to the medicines prescribed for them. This includes writing off the historic debt linked to dispensing activity during the pandemic and increasing fees linked to dispensing prescriptions.

18. Keir Starmer to call for countries to unite to eradicate 'vile trade' of people smuggling at summit

Sir Keir Starmer urge 40 countries to work together in a counter terror-style crackdown on people-smuggling gangs

The UK and other countries affected by people smuggling must not allow the "vile trade" to pit them against one another, the prime minister will tell a summit aimed at cracking down on illegal migration.

Sir Keir Starmer will call on 40 countries gathering in London this week to join his plans to launch a counter terror-style crackdown on people-smuggling gangs.

Countries including Albania, Vietnam and Iraq - from where migrants have travelled the UK - will join the talks, which are the first of their kind, alongside representatives from France, the US and China.

Ministers and enforcement staff will discuss international co-operation on illegal migration, as well as supply routes, criminal finances and online adverts for people smuggling during the meeting.

Officials from social media companies Meta, X and TikTok will also join discussions on how to crack down on the online promotion of irregular migration.



The prime minister and home secretary have vowed to crack down on people smugglers like terrorists (PA Archive)

The PM will announce £33m of funding to set up an international arm of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), which will target criminal gangs facilitating small boat crossings from abroad, The Times reported. The approach, paying foreign prosecutors to hunt down people smugglers around the world, mirrors the approach he used to combat Islamist terrorism as leader of the CPS.

The summit comes as the PM faces mounting pressure over small boats, with a record 6,642 migrants having crossed the Channel in 119 boats this year, a 43 per cent jump from this time last year.

Sir Keir is expected to call for unity among the nations involved when he addresses the summit on Monday afternoon.

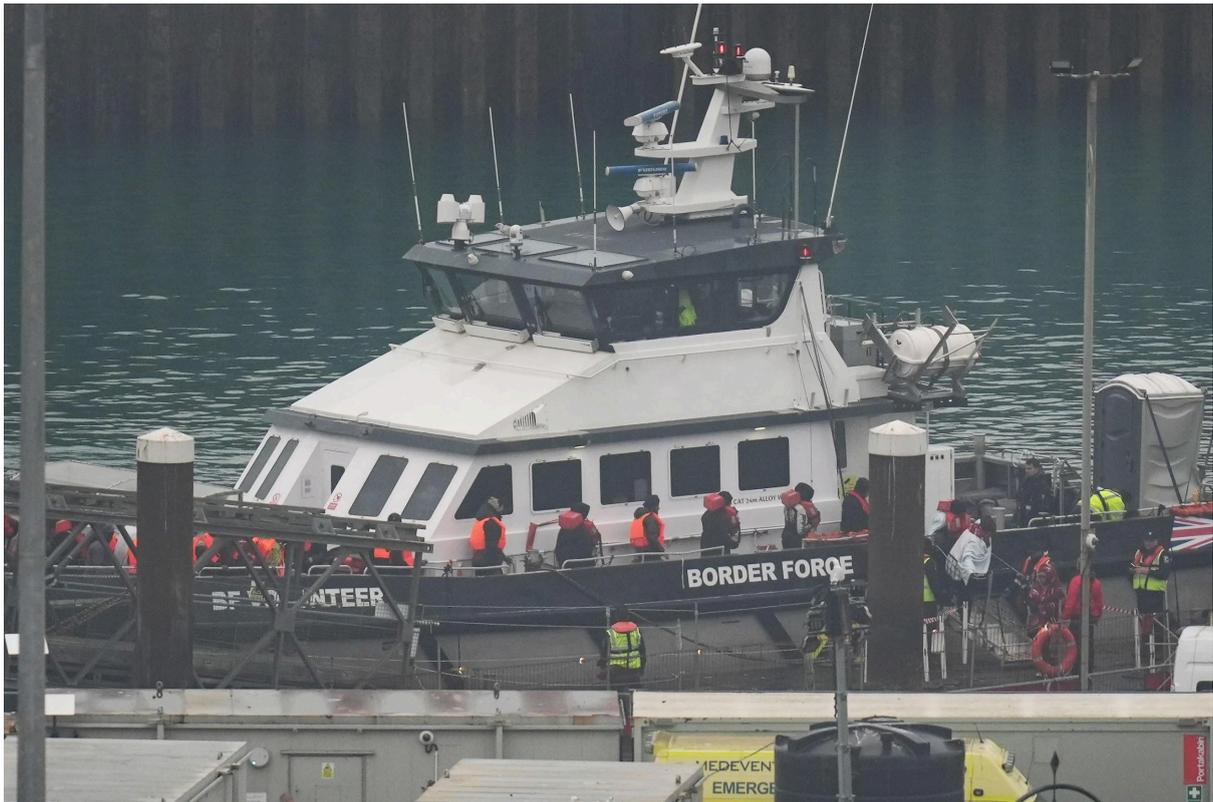
"This vile trade exploits the cracks between our institutions, pits nations against one another and profits from our inability at the political level to come together," he will say.

The prime minister will point to his time working across borders to foil terrorists when he was director of public prosecutions.

He will add: "I believe we should treat organised immigration crime in the same way.

"I simply do not believe organised immigration crime cannot be tackled. We've got to combine our resources, share intelligence and tactics, and tackle the problem upstream at every step of the people-smuggling routes."

The summit will deliver "concrete outcomes" for nations in Europe, Asia, Middle East, Africa, and North America, according to the Home Office.



[open image in gallery](#)

More than 5,000 migrants have crossed the channel this year (PA Wire)

Developments aimed at tackling illegal migration ahead of the gathering include:

- The Government will expand right-to-work checks to cover gig economy workers by making amendments to the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill. Businesses that do not carry out the checks could be fined up to £60,000, or face closures, director disqualifications, and even up to five years in prison.
- Home Secretary Yvette Cooper signalled she wanted to crack down on the number of people who have arrived in the UK on a student or work visa and have since claimed asylum.
- The Government is reviewing how Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the right to family life, applies to migration cases, Ms Cooper said. Several deportation attempts have been halted by how the ECHR clause has been interpreted in UK law. Ministers have looked to a tougher approach in Denmark for inspiration.
- Some £1 million in UK funding will go towards strengthened efforts to root out people-smuggling kingpins in Iraq's Kurdistan region, the Home Office announced.
- The UK has launched an advertising campaign on Vietnamese social media and messenger app Zalo, warning people about trusting people-smuggling gangs in an effort to reduce irregular migration from the south-east Asian country.

Speaking ahead of the summit, the Home Secretary said law enforcement needed to "work together across borders" to bring down people smuggling gangs.

She added: "Only a co-ordinated international response across the whole irregular migration route can effectively dismantle these networks.

"The Organised Immigration Crime Summit is the first of its kind and will reinforce the UK's position as a leader by securing international commitments to disrupt Organised Immigration Crime at every stage of the business model.

"The summit demonstrates mine and the Prime Minister's absolute dedication to disrupting the callous organised criminal gangs, strengthening our borders and ultimately save countless lives."

On Sunday, senior Tory shadow minister Alex Burghart said Labour should never have scrapped the Rwanda deportation plan.

"It was ready to go, and Labour came in, they won a majority, and they scrapped it. There is now no deterrent programme," he said.

19. Top Tory meets major landlords in bid to scupper Labour's rental reforms

A Tory frontbencher met landlord groups to discuss plans to frustrate or scupper Labour's overhaul of renters' rights

Top Tories are in private talks with big landlords in a bid to thwart Labour's Renters' Rights Bill, it has emerged.

In a bid to scupper the legislation, which overhauls private renting laws to give more protection to renters, senior Conservatives have met landlords to consider options, including a legal challenge under human rights law.

In a meeting between some of the UK's biggest landlords and shadow housing minister Jane Scott, the group discussed ideas including challenges in the courts and delaying the legislation with repeated amendments in the Lords, it was reported.



The bill is currently making its way through the House of Lords (PA)

Three people in attendance told The Guardian that Baroness Scott also vowed to do everything she could to force debates on multiple amendments to the bill, promising she could delay it until the autumn at least.

Campaign group Acorn said there is a "coordinated attempt by landlords and their supporters within the Lords to frustrate the progress of the Renters' Rights Bill".

Policy officer Anny Cullum said: "Unelected and unaccountable Tory peers are using underhand tactics to deliberately delay this vital legislation even more – legislation that many of them supported in its previous guise under the last government."

And charity Shelter said it is “utterly disgraceful that a handful of self-interested peers are resorting to cynical delay tactics designed to slow the progress of the Renters’ Rights Bill to a crawl”.

The Conservatives did not deny the meeting took place, with a party spokesperson adding: “The Conservatives have been warning that this bill is deeply flawed, as it will lead to a reduced supply of rental homes ... As is standard practice with all legislation, the official opposition engages privately with a range of stakeholders to hear their views.”



The Renters’ Rights Bill is being driven by Angela Rayner (Reuters)

Labour’s Renters’ Rights Bill sets out a raft of new legislation designed to give greater rights and protections to private renters in the UK.

The key measure in the bill is the abolition of Section 21’s so-called no-fault evictions, under which tenants can be removed from rented housing when a fixed-term tenancy ends or during a rolling tenancy.

Other measures include giving tenants the right to request a pet, with landlords unable to “unreasonably refuse” and able to request insurance to cover potential damage from pets if needed.

It will also strengthen tenants’ rights, with renters empowered to challenge unfair rent increases and plans to outlaw rental bidding wars by landlords and letting agents.

Under the bill, Labour will also make it illegal for landlords to discriminate against tenants in receipt of benefits or with children when choosing to rent out their property.

The party has accused the Tories of having “repeatedly refused to stand up for private renters” with a ban on no-fault evictions first announced by Theresa May in 2019.

Baroness Scott’s meeting included representatives from the property group Get Living, Dexters estate agents and the National Residential Landlord Association, among others, according to The Guardian.

A spokesperson for Get Living said: “We have always been clear that we want to see the Renters’ Rights Bill succeed. Renters deserve a better rental experience, but this needs to be balanced with maintaining an appealing and sustainable rental market for investors and landlords.

“Throughout the passage of the bill, we have raised our concerns with all major parties and want to work constructively with government to make the bill a success for renters and operators alike.”

20. Badenoch claims Adolescence ‘fundamentally changed’ story it is based on – despite admitting she hasn’t seen it

Theory that race of lead character was changed from the real-life case the series was based on has been dismissed by the show’s creator

Kemi Badenoch has said Adolescence is based on a true story that has been “fundamentally changed”, and that while it touches on an issue in society, Islamic terrorism is a bigger problem.

Co-creator Jack Thorne recently dismissed an online theory that the series changed the race of the lead character from a real-life case it was supposedly based on.

The drama about a teenage boy who is accused of killing a girl from his school examines so-called incel (involuntary celibate) culture and has prompted a national conversation about online safety.

Sir Keir Starmer hosted a roundtable at Downing Street with Thorne and children’s charities on Monday to talk about young boys being influenced by misogyny they encounter online.

Tory leader Mrs Badenoch said she had not watched the series.

“I don’t have time to watch anything to be honest, but I have read about it ... what I understand is that this is a fictional representation of a story that is actually quite different,” she told LBC.

“And I think it’s an interesting story. It certainly touches on some of the things that are happening in the world today, but it is not the biggest thing that is happening in the world today in terms of what is happening to people being radicalised on social media.”

She said she was aware of what the series is about.



The prime minister met with some of the show’s creators on Monday to discuss the issues raised in the series (Jack Taylor/PA Wire)

“I know what it’s about, and I’ve given a view that it is a work of fiction that is interesting, that touches on a problem in society, but there are bigger problems, such as Islamic terrorism and that kind

of radicalisation, and the story which it is based on has been fundamentally changed, and so creating policy on a work of fiction rather than on reality is the real issue.”

She pointed to the Conservatives’ policy to ban mobile phones in schools, which some have said is unnecessary as many schools already do not allow children to use mobiles.

A post on social media amplified by Elon Musk has suggested the story, which features a white actor, is based on the Southport attacker.

Co-creator Thorne recently rejected the accusations of “race-swapping” in the series.

It is not based on a true story and is “making a point about masculinity” and not race, Thorne told the News Agents podcast.

“It’s absurd to say that [knife crime] is only committed by black boys. It’s absurd. It’s not true. And history shows a lot of cases of kids from all races committing these crimes,” he added.

21. Donald Trump signs off Keir Starmer’s controversial Chagos Islands deal

UK and Mauritius now finalising deal, No 10 confirms after US president approves agreement

Donald Trump has formally signed off Sir Keir Starmer’s deal to hand the Chagos islands over to Mauritius, No 10 has said.

The agreement is now being “finalised” between the UK and Mauritius.

A Downing Street spokesperson said: “We are now working with the Mauritian government to finalise the deal and sign the treaty.”

A source added: “It’s now between us and the Mauritian government to finalise the deal following the discussions with us. We have had the discussions with the US and we are now finalising with the Mauritians.”



Trump signed off on Chagos when he met Starmer in the White House (Simon Dawson/Downing Street)

The revelation comes after the US president strongly indicated that he would back the deal when he met with Sir Keir in the White House in February, despite early indications he was sceptical of the deal.

At the time Mr Trump said: "I have a feeling it is going to work out very well. I think we will be inclined to go along with your country."

Critics have warned the deal, which reports suggest could cost as much as £18bn, unnecessarily leases back a strategically vital airbase that the UK already owns.

The plan follows an International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling that the archipelago belongs to Mauritius, which critics point out is not binding on the UK.

However, UK officials have told the White House that the judgment provided too much legal uncertainty for the crucial airbase and the deal would not cost the US taxpayer anything.

The Indian Ocean islands represent an important part of UK-US security plans because of the strategically crucial Diego Garcia airbase.

As part of the agreement, the UK and US believe they have secured use of the airbase for at least 99 years, but have so far refused to publish how much they will pay to be allowed to use it.

The sign-off will come as a relief to the PM as he braces for difficult news from Mr Trump later this week.

The UK government expects to be hit by tariffs in a move the US president has dubbed "Liberation Day".

In the wake of the announcement that President Trump had signed off the deal, further concerns were raised about reports that Iran may be contemplating a military strike on the Diego Garcia base, in a point of order in the Commons by Tory shadow defence minister Mark Francois.

He asked ministers to update MPs "regarding an implied military threat to the Chagos Archipelago, or a legal and diplomatic threat to the Chagos Islands, which are, and should remain, fundamentally British."

22. 'Awful April' bills rise will push people to poverty, homelessness and foodbanks, charities warn

Increasing cost of bills ranging from gas, electricity, water and council tax has left many 'dangerously exposed'

Foodbank use and homelessness are set to rise, charities have warned as 'awful April' pushes up the cost of crucial bills, including energy and water, for millions of households across the country.

People across the country are struggling to afford the bare essentials and with so many costs rising at once, from gas to council tax, has led to fresh calls for ministers to help limit the impact.

From Tuesday, the annual average energy bill will go up by £111 a year, or £9.25 a month, to £1,849, after Ofgem raised the energy cap.

Water bills are also set to soar by an average of 26 per cent, or £123 a year, in England and Wales, while council tax will rise by £108 a year on average, after ministers confirmed they would be allowed to increase by at most 5 per cent.

Matt Downie, chief executive at Crisis, the housing charity, warned it was becoming "even harder for people on low incomes to afford the basic essentials. This is leaving them dangerously exposed, forced into debt and in real danger of being pushed into homelessness as the cost of living crisis continues to bite."

Rachel Reeves' decision to freeze housing benefits from Tuesday in last October's Budget would also "push people deeper into poverty and homelessness," he added.



Trussell warned more people would be forced to turn to food banks (Danny Lawson/PA) (PA Archive) Helen Barnard, director of policy at the charity the Trussell Trust, which provides food banks across the country said the problem was a “perfect storm”.

“We know people are forced to turn to food banks when their income isn't enough to cover the cost of essentials we all need to get by - such as energy bills, food and toiletries,” she said.

"From today, a range of household bills are going up by more than inflation while social security support rises by just 1.7 per cent, which will hit people living on the lowest incomes the hardest.”

Joanna Elson, the chief executive of the Independent Age charity, said her organisation has spoken to many older people living on a low income who are very worried about rising energy, water and council tax bills.

She warned: “Many simply cannot afford the increases. This is resulting in people being forced to make dangerous cutbacks, including not using the heating or skipping meals.”

Caroline Abraham, charity director at Age UK, added: “Higher living costs are hitting every household, but we know that older people living on low or modest fixed incomes will find the increases especially hard. We’re still hearing from thousands of older people struggling to afford the basics as everything keeps going up.”

The Treasury has been approached for comment.

23. Former top judge condemns ‘unjustifiable interference’ by Trump over UK free speech

Lord Sumption, the former head of the UK Supreme Court, has lashed out after it was revealed the US State Department had attacked Britain, citing concerns about ‘freedom of expression’ in the UK

The former top judge in the UK’s Supreme Court has accused the Trump administration of “unjustifiable interference” after pressure was exerted on the UK over free speech.

Lord Sumption’s intervention came after the US State Department made a rare intervention in British politics, warning of its “concerns about freedom of expression in the United Kingdom”.

The department, responsible for US foreign policy, put a statement on X, highlighting fears about the prosecution of anti-abortion campaigner Livia Tossici-Bolt.

The row has come after The Independent revealed that vice president J.D. Vance is intending to use spurious claims over free speech being attacked in the UK to force Keir Starmer to ditch his online safety bill and digital services tax as part of a deal on a free trade agreement.

The State Department alleged Ms Tossici-Bolt faces criminal charges for offering conversation with patients seeking abortions within a legally prohibited “buffer zone” outside a clinic. “We are monitoring her case. It is important that the UK respect and protect freedom of expression,” the State Department’s dedicated democracy, human rights and labour (DRL) account posted.



US Vice-President JD Vance recently criticised abortion buffer zones in Scotland (Matthias Schrader/AP) (AP)

It added: “US-UK relations share a mutual respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

“However, as Vice President Vance has said, we are concerned about freedom of expression in the United Kingdom.”

The account has previously criticised police in Scotland over a similar incident in a restricted “buffer zone” near an abortion clinic. Other countries criticised by the arm of the State Department include Bangladesh, Iran and Russia.

It comes after the department’s senior DRL advisor visited the UK in March and met with Ms Tossici-Bolt, who leads an anti-abortion group called 40 Days for Life Bournemouth.

Lord Sumption told PM on BBC Radio 4: “It’s a completely unjustifiable interference in the internal affairs of another country. I do not think that the United States has jurisdiction over the world’s laws.

“The fact is that all civilised countries place some limitations on free speech, even the United States.

“I don’t believe it’s any business of the United States to criticise this. The principal offender against free speech at the moment, outside obvious totalitarian states like Russia or China, is in fact the

United States of America, which makes it extremely ironic that they've taken to lecturing other people on the subject.”

Ms Tossici-Bolt was on trial at Poole Magistrates’ Court in February having been accused of breaching the Public Spaces Protection Order on two days in March 2023. A verdict on her case is due on Friday.



(PA Wire)

She was prosecuted for holding a sign near a Bournemouth abortion reading: “Here to talk if you want to.” Buffer zones are in place within 150 metres of clinics to prevent women seeking abortions from being harassed by protesters. They make it an offence to do anything that intentionally or recklessly influences someone’s decision to use abortion services, obstructs them, or causes harassment, alarm or distress to someone using or working at the premises.

And Ms Tossici-Bolt, a retired medical scientist living in Bournemouth, Dorset, welcomed the high-profile US intervention in her case. She said: "I am grateful to the US State Department for taking note of my case.

"Great Britain is supposed to be a free country, yet I've been dragged through court merely for offering consensual conversation. I'm thankful to ADF International for supporting my legal defence.

"Peaceful expression is a fundamental right - no one should be criminalised for harmless offers to converse."

She added: "It is tragic to see that the increase of censorship in this country has made the US feel it has to remind us of our shared values and basic civil liberties.

"I'm grateful to the US administration for prioritising the preservation and promotion of freedom of expression and for engaging in robust diplomacy to that end.

"It deeply saddens me that the UK is seen as an international embarrassment when it comes to free speech.

"My case, involving only a mere invitation to speak, is but one example of the extreme and undeniable state of censorship in Great Britain today.

"It is important that the government actually does respect freedom of expression, as it claims to."

Fears were raised that Ms Tossici-Bolt's case was responsible for the UK's failure to strike a trade deal with the US and avoid Donald Trump's tariffs, with one source telling the Daily Telegraph there should be "no free trade without free speech".

But, asked about the claim, business secretary Jonathan Reynolds told Times Radio: "No, I can say as someone who is very closely part of the issues that are currently being discussed, obviously there are things from different people in the administration that they've said in the past about this, but it's not been part of the trade negotiations that I've been part of."

24. Minister urges 'cool heads' as Rachel Reeves begs Trump not to slap tariffs on the UK

Industry figures show the US is the second largest export market after the EU for cars built in the UK

Embattled chancellor Rachel Reeves has begged Donald Trump not to impose crippling tariffs on UK car exports next week.

It comes as business secretary Jonathan Reynolds urged colleagues to "keep cool heads" amid growing concerns that a trade war will create a black hole in the UK accounts. The fears come just as the chancellor had imposed eye-watering cuts on benefits to balance the books.

Ms Reeves disclosed the government is in emergency talks with the US to stop the levy, which is due to take effect next Wednesday.

But the Office of Budget Responsibility (OBR) has warned that the £10bn of headroom she created to give herself some flexibility to deal with unforeseen events will be wiped out if tariffs come in on Wednesday next week.

In a stark warning against counter measures, OBR chair Richard Hughes warned that "in a worst case scenario" if the UK were to retaliate the country would lose 1 per cent of GDP.



Rachel Reeves says UK not planning retaliatory tariffs on US "at the moment" (EPA)

President Trump's announcement of a 25 per cent tariff on all car imports, including from the UK, is another setback to the chancellor after widespread criticism of her spring statement.

Ms Reeves told BBC Radio 4's Today programme the UK is in "intense negotiations at the moment with our US counterparts" over "cars and steel and every other type of tariff".

She added: "[Negotiations have] been ongoing since our prime minister, Keir Starmer, went to the White House to meet the US president just a few weeks ago. Those talks continue."

Asked if the talks could lead to exemption for UK-based car companies, she replied: "Well, that's what we're working on. We've got a few more days left of those negotiations before these tariffs are due to come in."

She said Mr Trump was "rightly concerned" about countries with large trade surpluses with the US. But she added: "The UK is not one of those countries. We do not run a surplus with them."

The vehicle tariffs are the latest threat to Ms Reeves's economic plans, which are under fire from experts after her package of announcements on Wednesday.

Around four out of five cars made in the UK are exported, and 16.9 per cent of UK car exports were to the US last year.

In an attempt to avoid being drawn into a trade war with the US, Ms Reeves told Sky News: "We're not at the moment at a position where we want to do anything to escalate these trade wars."



US president Donald Trump and prime minister Sir Keir Starmer met at the White House (PA Wire) "Trade wars are no good for anyone. It will end up with higher prices for consumers, pushing up inflation after we've worked so hard to get a grip of inflation, and at the same time will make it harder for British companies to export."

She went on: "We are looking to secure a better trading relationship with the United States. I recognise that the week ahead is important. There are further talks going on today, so let's see where we get to in the next few days."

Figures from industry body the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT) show the US is the second largest export market after the European Union for cars built in the UK.

Jaguar Land Rover could be one of the UK vehicle manufacturers most affected by tariffs.



A 25 per cent tariff on vehicles imported to the US will come into effect on 2 April, the US president announced on Wednesday (AP)

But speaking at an event at Chatham House, business secretary Jonathan Reynolds urged people to keep their cool.

"With the US, we've said that obviously we have a different set of views to where they're coming from... you can understand and engage with that even if you don't necessarily agree with it," Mr Reynolds told the conference.

Decisions in the US come from a "belief on their side that it hasn't got the right tools to deal with particularly overcapacity, and overproduction in some key sectors", he said.

"This is a time for cool heads and pragmatism and this is how we're approaching these things."

The minister admitted that there were "concerns and tensions", but also said that "the basis of a UK trade strategy has got to be in the UK's national interest", adding: "I can't fight battles for other countries."

Meanwhile, Tory shadow chancellor Mel Stride said it is "very important" that the UK has a trade deal with the US which "means we are protected from those tariffs".

He told ITV's Good Morning Britain: "I think it's a balance between we want to make sure that we have the right relationship with America on all sorts of levels, including security as well as economic, in order to make sure we get the very best for our country."

The Liberal Democrats, on the other hand, have called on the government to "toughen up" and introduce retaliatory tariffs on US carmakers like Tesla.

The party's deputy leader Daisy Cooper told BBC Radio 4's Today programme: "I think there's only one language that Donald Trump understands, and that is the language of strength.

"What we Liberal Democrats are very concerned about is that the government strategy so far seems to be to cower in the corner and just ask Donald Trump to be nice to us, and just to hope that he doesn't do anything nasty.

“That is not a strategy. So, we think the government needs to toughen up.

“We think the government needs to start preparing for retaliatory tariffs, and that those tariffs, that preparation, should start by looking at putting tariffs on Tesla cars, because clearly Elon Musk is a huge backer of Donald Trump, and that’s where we would start.”

25. No evidence Labour welfare cuts will get more people into work, OBR says

The spending watchdog’s says it was not provided with an analysis of how the reforms could boost employment

Labour’s plan to support more people into work through cost-cutting welfare reforms has been called into question by the Office for Budget Responsibility’s (OBR) own economic forecast.

Released to accompany the party’s spring statement, the spending watchdog’s report said it was not provided with an analysis of how the reforms could boost employment, adding it was also unable to make its own in the limited time available.

The revelation follows accusations Rachel Reeves “rushed” welfare reforms in light of pressure from the OBR to secure a larger fiscal headroom.

The chancellor laid out more details of Labour’s planned £4.8 billion in welfare cuts on Wednesday as she delivered the new government’s first spring statement in power.



Rachel Reeves has been accused by the opposition of rushing welfare reforms (PA Media)

Confirming the changes, Ms Reeves said: “The Labour Party is the party of work. We believe that if you can work, you should work. But if you can’t work, you should be properly supported.

“This government inherited a broken system,” she said, adding: “If we do nothing, we are writing off an entire generation. That cannot be right, and we will not stand for it. It is a waste of their potential and it is a waste of their futures.”

Responding to the announcement, Conservative shadow chancellor Mel Stride said: “It was rushed, it was botched, and it was last minute,” adding: “That’s not fair on millions of people, many of whom are vulnerable and need to be supported, because you don’t rush those decisions.”

The OBR says that Labour’s plans constitute the largest single proposal of welfare cuts since measures announced in July 2015 by the Conservatives under then-prime minister David Cameron.

Offering a preliminary analysis of their possible effects on employment, the OBR said the cuts “would be expected to reduce income and so increase work incentives for existing claimants.” However, its forecast adds that individuals receiving disability benefits do generally have limited capability for work, so it is difficult to evaluate the changes in the same way as it would for non-disabled people.

Tom Pollard, head of social policy at the New Economics Foundation says the Treasury’s aims are an “economic fantasy.”

“I think it is just like something straight out of an economics textbook that doesn't bear any relation to the people's lived experience,” he said.



DWP secretary Liz Kendall revealed Labour’s welfare plans in March (AP)

“What actually happens when you reduce someone's income is that they struggle more to make ends meet... they become very focused on the the day-to-day task of survival [and] it becomes harder for them to think about and move towards longer term objectives.”

The Department for Work and Pensions’ (DWP) own assessment of the plans admits that they will push an additional 250,000 people into poverty, including 50,000 children – and some experts claim even this is an underestimate.

Leading anti-poverty charity Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) said the true number would be closer to 400,000. This is because the DWP’s assessment factors in a 150,000 reduction in poverty figures made from reversing the previous government’s plans to change the Work Capability Assessment (WCA).

However, the charity argued that because these changes never happened it was a misleading statistic to include.

Following the changes, an estimated 800,000 people are also set to lose their entitlement to the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) as eligibility for the benefit is restricted. This forms the bulk of the government's cost-cutting package, but the OBR said that PIP can be received both in and out of work, making it less likely that it will boost claimants' incentive to work.

Mr Pollard suggested Labour's sudden decision to slash spending could be explained by the tension between the OBR and ministers. "We're in this place of DWP being put under pressure by Number 10 and Treasury to make blunter cuts," he said.

"I think there's a real risk where the DWP gets pushed into a corner where the only type of savings that the OBR and Treasury would acknowledge are very crude cuts to benefit rates."

He said he department's 'Get Britain Working' White Paper published last year offered a much more "positive agenda" to support people back to work, but likely didn't sufficiently convince the OBR that savings would be made in the long-term. This paper included measures like Jobcentre reform and a 'Youth Guarantee' to bring down economic activity amongst young people.

The DWP has been approached for comment.

26. Nigel Farage paid £189,000 to be brand ambassador for gold company

Nigel Farage has been paid tens of thousands of pounds to be the ambassador of a gold bullion company, the latest alternate income for the Reform UK leader.

The Member of Parliament for Clacton was paid £189,300 from Direct Bullion for a brand ambassador role in December, according to the latest MP's register of interests. By comparison, the basic annual salary for an MP is £91,346, plus expenses.

The hefty sum amounts to just four hours of work per month, according to the self-reported register, and includes some work undertaken before Mr Farage was elected in July.



Reform UK leader Nigel Farage has a number of lucrative sidelines (Jacob King/PA) (PA Wire)

Mr Farage appeared in a series of videos for the gold dealer beginning in March, touting gold as a capital gains tax-free investment option.

“I have been bullish [on] gold for over five years and am delighted with the results,” Mr Farage told the Independent.

This £189,000 sum adds to a long list of jobs for Mr Farage, ranging from social media influencer to GB news pundit.

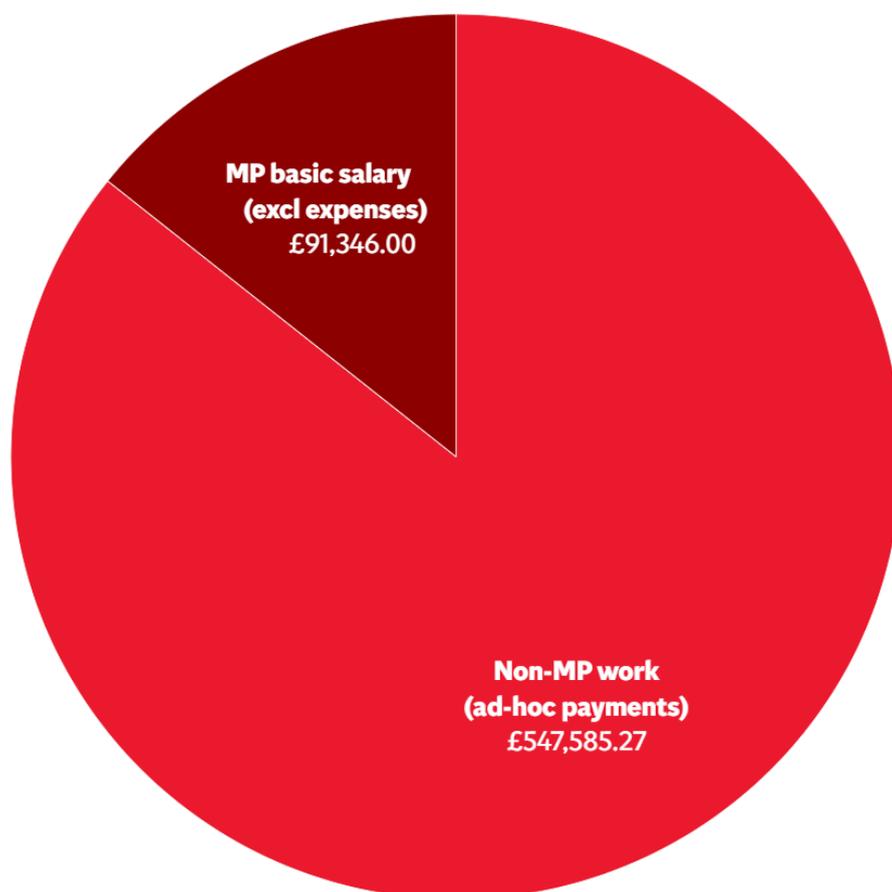
This makes him one of the top-paid MPs in the country, with a total sum of at least £547,583 in payment for non-MP employment in 2024 according to his register of interests.

Farage earns 6x his MP salary for other jobs

Since being elected in July 2024, Nigel Farage has registered payments totalling £547k for non-MP work; ranging from social media to his new gold ambassador role.

This is far greater than the basic MP salary, which sits at £91k.

■ Non-MP work (ad-hoc payments) ■ MP basic salary (excl expenses)



Register of interests for Nigel Farage from July 2024 to 6 January 2025.

Chart: Alicja Hagopian • Source: Register of Member's Financial Interests



Mr Farage's register of interests since he was elected include a self-estimated 456 hours of work for external paid opportunities, not including an estimated 16 hours per month (80 hours in total) writing for the Daily Telegraph.

This amounts to approximately 58 days of paid work for non-MP duties, or about 11.6 weeks, in the same period; or 68 days including his Telegraph gig.

Mr Farage told the Independent he did not believe that his multiple jobs distracted from his constituency work.

In December, Mr Farage received a further £42,076 for presenting on GB News, bringing his total registered salary from the network to around £220,000 since being elected.

One of Mr Farage's most lucrative side gigs is the video platform Cameo, for which he was paid £15,451 between November and December alone.

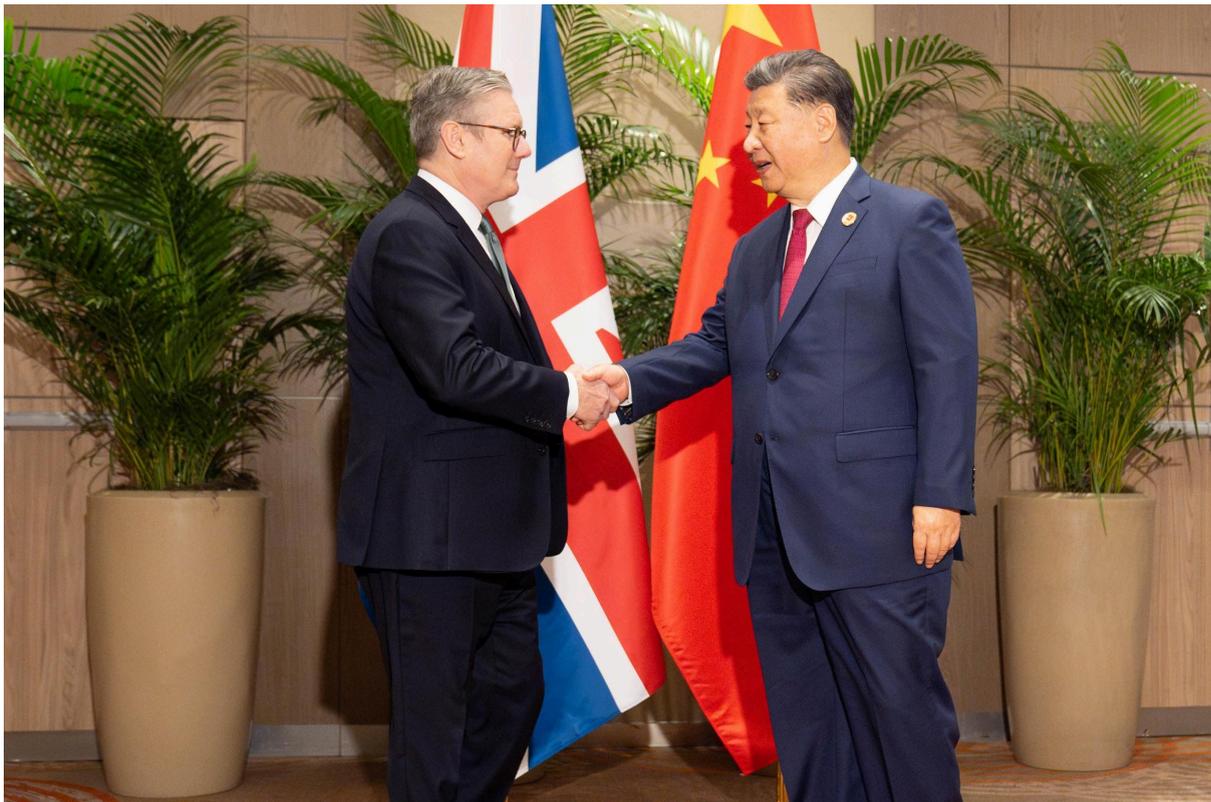
Cameo users can pay to receive personalised videos from Mr Farage, some of which have gotten him into hot water. His Cameo earnings total to approximately £53,000 since he began reporting his interests.

27. Labour MP warns Starmer he is crossing a red line with China embassy deal

A Labour MP has issued a warning to Sir Keir Starmer as he helps lead protests against the government giving the green light to a controversial new Chinese embassy in London.

East Renfrewshire MP Blair McDougall, a member of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, will join other MPs including former security minister Tom Tugendhat, former Tory leader Sir Iain Duncan Smith and shadow justice secretary Robert Jenrick in a protest today against the proposed new building.

It comes amid growing concerns over attempts by Sir Keir's government to build relations with China at a time when the new Donald Trump administration in the US is on the cusp of a trade war with the communist country.



The Labour Government has sought to improve relations with China as it pursues economic growth (Stefan Rousseau/PA) (PA Wire)

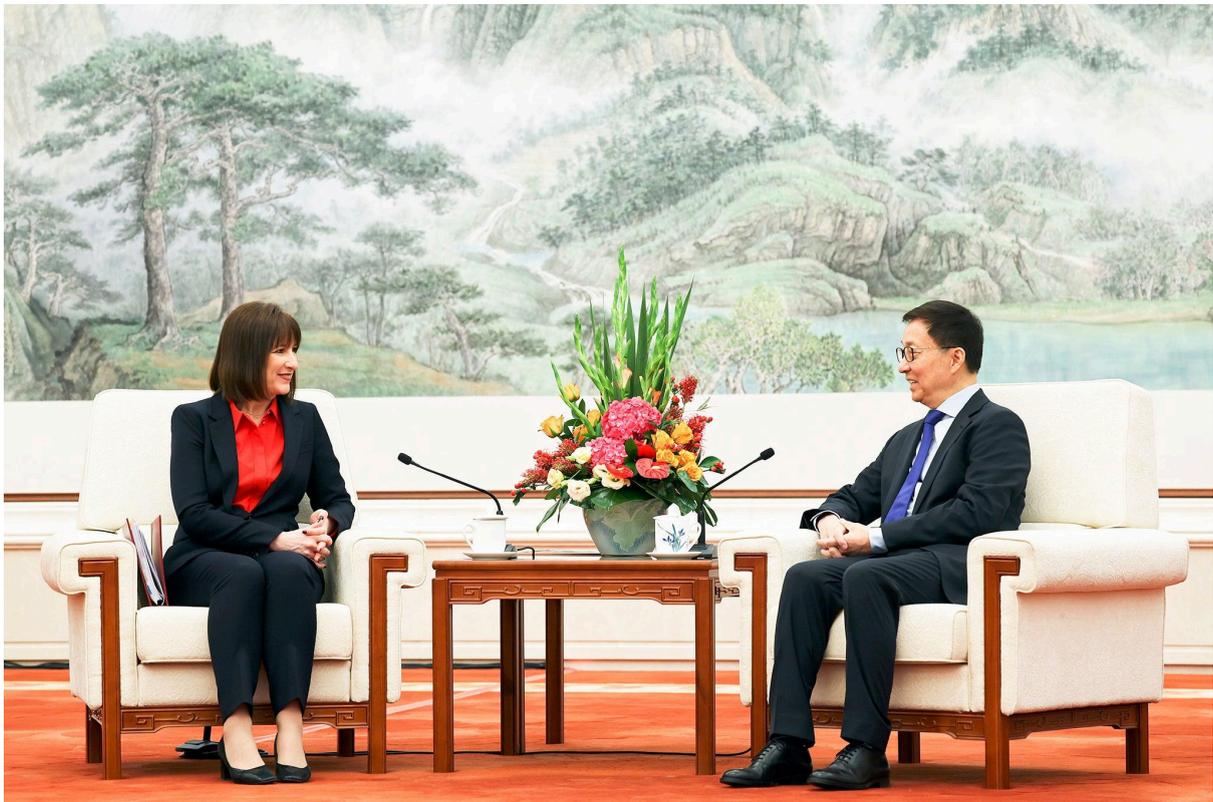
But of greater worry is human rights abuses in China, including persecution of the Uyghur population and the way that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has abandoned large aspects of its deal with the UK over guarantees for free speech in Hong Kong. This includes businessman Jimmy Lai, 77, who recently passed his 1,500th day imprisoned in Hong Kong on politically motivated charges.

Mr McDougall said: “We have to have red lines in our relations with Beijing. Currently Jimmy Lai, a British citizen, is in prison for exercising the rights that are guaranteed under the agreement between the UK and China. We should not be doing any favours for Beijing while they are in breach of past deals.”

The previous Tory government had blocked the new Chinese embassy proposed for Royal Mint Court in London on security grounds, with objections coming from the Metropolitan Police and security services.

But following chancellor Rachel Reeves’s controversial trip to China last month, it is understood that the government has asked for objections to be withdrawn to allow the development to go ahead.

The CCP wants to turn 20,000 square metres (2 hectares) of land at Royal Mint Court into Europe’s largest embassy building. After China bought the site in 2018, Tower Hamlets Council refused it planning permission in 2022 due to a range of concerns, including the impact of large protests at the site. The Tory government declined to reconsider the plan.



Reeves made a controversial trip to China (EPA)

However, Xi Jinping’s government resubmitted the application after Labour came to power last July. The new government called it in for review after the Chinese president raised the matter directly with Mr Starmer. Cabinet ministers Yvette Cooper and David Lammy have signalled their support for the proposal. An inquiry is due to begin into the proposal next week.

Mark Nygate, treasurer of the Royal Mint Court Residents’ Association, said: “We’re all unhappy with the way the government has gone about this process – it seems to have got involved and not allowed the inspector to do her bit.

“They called for a public inquiry, appointed an inspector – and next thing you’ve got David Lammy and Yvette Cooper writing a letter to the council saying they would approve the scheme based on a couple of changes to the plan ... But the damage that would be caused to my block and the estate is huge.”

Alex Brookes, Poplar and Limehouse Conservative Association activist, added: “The first job of government is to keep people safe. There is no point in trying to have a closer economic relationship

with China if local residents aren't safe. The protests on Saturday proved that this is not a suitable location for a 'super embassy', next to the Tower of London, which clearly disrupted traffic over Tower Bridge.

"Therefore, Angela Rayner should consider the potential impact before rushing through the application, which could undermine local residents safety."

28. Health minister Andrew Gwynne sacked over WhatsApp messages

Health minister Andrew Gwynne has been sacked over alleged "antisemitic", "sexist" and "racist" comments posted on a WhatsApp group.

Mr Gwynne becomes the latest former ally of Jeremy Corbyn to be ousted by Keir Starmer after reportedly making antisemitic comments and "joked" about a pensioner constituent, saying he hoped she died before the next election, according to the *The Mail on Sunday*.

The Gorton and Denton MP said he hoped a 72-year-old woman would soon be dead after she dared to ask about her bins, *The Mail on Sunday* reported.

In a mock message, he allegedly wrote on the TriggerMe Timbers Whatsapp group with Labour councillors: "Dear resident, F*** your bins. I'm re-elected and without your vote. Screw you. PS: Hopefully you'll have croaked it by the all-outs."



Andrew Gwynne MP 
@GwynneMP



I deeply regret my badly misjudged comments and apologise for any offense I've caused. I've served the Labour Party all my life and it was a huge honour to be appointed a minister by Keir Starmer. 1/2

6:17 PM · Feb 8, 2025 · 47.8K Views

Andrew Gwynne said he deeply regretted his 'badly misjudged' remarks (X)

He is also accused of making racist comments about Labour MP Dianne Abbot, and sexist remarks about deputy prime minister Angela Rayner, the paper claimed.

Then when members of the Whatsapp group asked if Marshall Rosenberg, a conflict resolution expert, would attend a local Labour party meeting, Mr Gwynne reportedly said: "No. He sounds too militaristic and too Jewish. Is he in Mossad?"

While ministers have defended the prime minister for acting quickly, the scandal could yet drag in another MP and Labour councillors.

Sir Keir has made it clear that he will not tolerate antisemitism in the party after the issue almost destroyed Labour's reputation under Mr Corbyn. Another ally of the former leader Rebecca Long-Bailey was sacked in 2020 from the shadow cabinet for retweeting an antisemitic post on social media.

Meanwhile, Mr Gwynne was accused by Trevor Phillips on Sky News of only giving "a non apology apology" for his actions.

In a statement Mr Gwynne said: "I deeply regret my badly misjudged comments and apologise for any offense I've caused. I've served the Labour Party all my life and it was a huge honour to be appointed a minister by Keir Starmer.

"I entirely understand the decisions the PM and the party have taken and, while very sad to have been suspended, will support them in any way I can."

A government spokesperson said: "The prime minister is determined to uphold high standards of conduct in public office and lead a government in the service of working people.

"He will not hesitate to take action against any minister who fails to meet these standards, as he has in this case."

A Labour spokesperson confirmed Mr Gwynne had been suspended as a member of the Labour party.

"We are investigating comments made in this WhatsApp group in line with the Labour Party's rules and procedures.

"Swift action will be taken if individuals are found to have breached the high standards expected of them as Labour Party members," it said.

Mr Gwynne was one of the few leading allies of Corbyn to survive the change of leadership having been national campaign coordinator for the former leader.



Andrew Gwynne was sacked as health minister (Gareth Fuller/PA) (PA Archive)

He has been part of Wes Streeting's team in health and was a junior minister in the Department for Health and Care before his sacking on Saturday.

Nigel Huddleston, co-chair of the Conservative Party, said: "There is a clear contempt for pensioners in the Labour Party. This clearly goes beyond Andrew Gwynne and there is a rot in Labour that needs fixing. Andrew Gwynne should not remain a member of the Labour Party, they need to act."

Andrew Gwynne's sacking is latest in string of Government departures

Gwynne's dismissal follows other recent departures from the government, including Tulip Siddiq, Louise Haigh, and Sue Gray.

- Siddiq resigned as Treasury minister over allegations related to her aunt, former Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, and an anti-corruption investigation.
- Haigh resigned as transport secretary after admitting to misleading police about a stolen phone in 2013.
- Gray left her position as Downing Street chief of staff after less than 100 days, citing concerns about becoming a "distraction" amid reports of infighting and scrutiny over her salary.
- Read more.

Housing minister Matthew Pennycook could not say if others in the chat will be suspended, which reportedly included another Labour MP.

"I don't know, personally, what other people on that WhatsApp conversation have said... I've being very clear, there's an investigation taking place into the whole incident," he told Sunday Morning With Trevor Phillips on Sky News.

He added: "What the public can take from the way the Prime Minister has acted decisively in this case to dismiss Andrew Gwynne is that if any other Labour MP or minister falls short he will act to uphold the highest standards in public office."

The language Mr Gwynne reportedly used in messages is "completely unacceptable" and "in some instances, it's deeply concerning", Mr Pennycook added.

Asked about alleged antisemitic remarks made in the WhatsApp group, he said: "An investigation is taking place, and any action that needs to follow from that investigation will be seen through.

"I don't think anyone can be in any doubt about this prime minister or this Government's commitment to upholding the highest standards in public office and to rooting out antisemitism from the Labour Party, root and branch."

29. Lammy warns Trump's foreign aid cuts could be 'big strategic mistake'

Foreign secretary David Lammy has warned Donald Trump that slashing foreign aid to countries could be a major "strategic mistake", drawing parallels to the fallout from Britain's own aid cuts.

Mr Trump has sent shockwaves across the countries that were dependent on US foreign aid after his administration imposed a sweeping freeze on aid programs under the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

Thousands of staff have already been laid off, and programs supporting health services, disaster relief, and anti-poverty efforts in nearly 100 countries are scrambling after the shutdown, including in Ukraine.

Mr Lammy told the Guardian on Friday that the US government should "look closely at what went wrong" when the previous UK government shut down its Department for International Development (Dfi). He was referring to former prime minister Boris Johnson's actions of merging Dfid with the Foreign Office in 2020.

"What I can say to American friends is it's widely accepted that the decision by the UK with very little preparation to close down Dfid, to suspend funding in the short term or give many global partners little heads up, was a big strategic mistake," he told the newspaper.

"We have spent years unravelling that strategic mistake. Development remains a very important soft power tool," he added.

"We were hugely critical of the way that the last government handled the decision. So I would caution US friends to look closely at what went wrong in the United Kingdom as they navigate this decision."

The top receivers under the USAID programme's roughly \$40bn budget were Ukraine, Ethiopia, Jordan, Yemen, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Syria.

On Friday, a federal judge in Washington, DC, put the brakes on the controversial plan to gut the USAID workforce by issuing a temporary restraining order. It blocked the Trump administration from placing roughly 2,200 USAID workers on administrative leave, hours before the administration was set to send them packing at midnight.

It was after unions representing nearly 2,000 USAID employees filed a lawsuit against Trump and administration officials on Thursday.

Mr Lammy, who was in Kyiv, met Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky and other senior officials.

He said he did not see any hope of an imminent end to war with Russia despite Mr Trump's pledge to end the war under his second administration. Peace talks are set to begin at a security conference in Munich next week.

"I am not sure we are weeks away from peace talks. And I say that because our assessment, which I'm quite sure the US shares, is that Putin shows absolutely no appetite for negotiation and to bring this war to an end," he told the Guardian.

He added that the "Ukrainians are pretty clear there can be no ceasefire before negotiations".

"So I don't anticipate a ceasefire in this war anytime soon. I'm very clear that Putin at the moment shows no desire to negotiate. And therefore, sadly, I think this war of attrition will go on for some months yet," he said.

30. Trump and Farage branded 'political fraudsters' in warning over workers' rights

Donald Trump's assault on workers should be "cautionary tale" for Britain, the UK's leading trade union official has warned, amid the rise of Nigel Farage's Reform.

Trade Union Congress (TUC) general secretary Paul Nowak said the president's actions have shown that people considering supporting Reform UK could lose their jobs if Mr Farage were to follow his lead on rolling back workers' rights should he become prime minister.

Mr Nowak will be taking his warning to a major summit in Washington DC just a short distance from the White House as he plans a fightback against Reform's surge in the UK polls.

The TUC leader is in Washington at the World Bank HQ for a major event held by the IMF, World Bank and ITUC, bringing together leaders from the global union movement and senior officials from international financial institutions.

It comes as he and other trade union leaders begin a fightback against "rightwing populism" which has seen Trump take the White House, Farage's Reform UK surge to the top of the polls, and the far right Alternative for Germany looking set to become the second biggest party in Germany.



Trump and Farage are close allies (Getty)

The TUC is attempting to flex its muscles in the fightback against the rise of Reform in the UK with 5.5 million members in its 48 affiliated trade unions.

Ahead of his meeting, Mr Novak told The Independent that Trump's attack on workers' rights should ring alarm bells and, in a swipe at Mr Farage, warned: "this is what happens when you let the populist right in".

It follows polling carried out by the TUC and campaign group Hope Not Hate which revealed that a majority of Reform supporters want much stronger workers rights and protections which both Mr Farage and President Trump oppose.

This includes the majority of voters in Mr Farage's and Tory leader Kemi Badenoch's constituencies.

In his first few weeks as president, Donald Trump has fired the head of the US labour watchdog National Labor Relations Board, which has effectively left it unable to operate.

Trump has also empowered tech billionaire Elon Musk to fire thousands of federal workers – moves that union officials say have violated laws and rules that require due process.



TUC leader Paul Nowak (Peter Byrne/PA) (PA Wire)

The TUC general secretary highlighted the close relationship between President Trump, Mr Musk and Mr Farage, saying you should “judge a man by the company he keeps”.

Mr Farage has openly courted the support of Mr Musk and has publicly and vocally backed President Trump.

At the same time, Mr Farage and the Reform Party have at every stage voted against the Employment Rights Bill, which includes banning exploitative zero hours contracts and protecting workers from being sacked unfairly.

Mr Nowak told The Independent: “What’s unfolding in the US should be a cautionary tale for us all. This is what happens when you let the political fraudsters of the populist right in.

“Having promised to be a champion for working people, President Trump is already torching workers’ rights and slashing public services. And he’s empowered unelected tech billionaire -and union buster - Elon Musk to fire thousands of essential government workers.

“Nigel Farage is making the same bogus claims about being on the side of working people here in the UK. But you should judge a man by his record and the company he keeps.

He added: “Given the choice of supporting legislation that will boost worker protections and incomes – Farage and Reform have chosen instead to be on the side of bad bosses, zero hours contracts and fire and rehire.”

Appendix 2. The Guardian Sub-Corpus

1. ‘Tories are not listening’: Ed Davey sure Lib Dems can woo more disgruntled voters

Days before the local elections, with Kemi Badenoch demanding apologies over gender identity and Nigel Farage complaining about mental illness diagnoses, Ed Davey was quietly getting on with what he perhaps does best: having fun.

In a converted shed near Stratford-upon-Avon, the Liberal Democrat leader was joking with photographers as he made chocolate truffles alongside Manuela Perteghella, his party's MP for the formerly true-blue constituency.

The council, Warwickshire, is also about as Conservative as it gets, and currently has 41 Tory councillors out of 57. But privately, Lib Dem activists say it could move into no overall control next week.

"I think it feels even better than the general election," Davey said, truffles cooling in a fridge before he headed off for some door-knocking. And this, remember, was the Lib Dems' best general election for a century, in which – helped in part by Davey's succession of camera-friendly stunts – the party won 72 seats, mostly from the Conservatives.

With much of the focus before the local elections on Reform UK's rise and the impact this could have on Labour, the Lib Dems have just been, as one party strategist called it, "getting on with the job".

Part of this is the sheer graft so admired by Farage that he wants to use it as a model for Reform, with 500,000 doors knocked on during March, and 1m leaflets delivered before election spending limits kicked in.

But also to the Lib Dems' advantage is that many of next Thursday's battles take place in traditionally Conservative counties, where the Tories won heavily amid the brief if spectacular Boris Johnson vaccine bounce of 2021, the last time they were contested.

According to Davey, the general election trend of less ideologically minded Conservative voters fleeing a party they see as overly weighted towards populism and culture wars has shown no signs of slowing under Badenoch.

"People who were lifelong Conservatives haven't forgiven them, they're not impressed by the leader, and some are put off by this talk of some sort of arrangement with Reform," he said.



Ed Davey helping local campaigners maintain a chalk stream of the River Chess in Chesham, Buckinghamshire. Photograph: Tolga Akmen/EPA

Things are not entirely the same as they were last July, however. One paradox of the spectacular general election result is that in some places, including Warwickshire, the Lib Dems have reversed their usual tactic of patiently building up a mass of councillors before making a tilt at the parliamentary seat.

Instead, as in Warwickshire, they hope to use a surprise parliamentary win – Perteghella overcame a 20,000 Conservative majority to win by 7,000 votes – to create momentum for the council.

Plus there is the advent of some early Lib Dem-Reform battles, notably for the new mayoralty in Hull and East Yorkshire. While Davey is making no predictions, he is scornful about Farage’s success thus far in building up a Lib Dem-style on-the-ground army.

“This is just anecdotal, but Reform have tried door-knocking one or two places, and they got such a hostile reception from quite a lot of doors, they quickly give up. So they’re not fighting the campaign that we do.”

But the bulk of the party’s targets of councils to potentially win – Oxfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Devon, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire – or to make gains, such as Warwickshire, Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire, are still mainly in the once Tory-loyal commuter belt areas loosely known as the “blue wall”.

Davey, who gets recognised more regularly on doorsteps after his bungee jumping and water sliding of the general election, faces a Conservative party that seems vastly more focused on tackling Reform than trying to win back the voters and seats taken by the Lib Dems.

Asked if he is surprised at this, Davey said: “Well, not really, given the MPs they’ve got. All the moderate Conservatives, the liberal conservatives, one-nation Conservatives, pro-European Conservatives, they’ve all gone.”

In their place are people such as Badenoch, who memorably dismissed the Lib Dems as people who spurn social media to instead focus on “fixing their church roof”, a quote party insiders delightedly say could not have been phrased better if they had written it themselves.

“The Conservatives are in a bit of a bubble, aren’t they?” Davey said. “They’re talking to themselves. They’re certainly not listening to the public. It’s the fact that they inhabit an X-sphere, if you like, a Twitter-sphere.”

While some Tories argue that a pact with Reform would instantly give this new rightwing block a combined vote share well over 40%, Lib Dem insiders say they are unworried, saying any deal would make the Conservatives even more toxic to many voters, and inspire fervent tactical voting to keep them out.

“They will decide what they want to do about a pact, but I think there would be a huge number of traditional Conservatives who would be appalled at that process,” Davey said. “I think they would look round for a different home, and see the Liberal Democrats as that home.”

2. Streeting says Reform are real threat and may become Labour’s main rivals

Wes Streeting has said Reform is a real threat and could replace the Conservatives as the main opposition party by the next election, as he urged the public to give Labour the “benefit of the doubt”. The health secretary said Nigel Farage’s party was being treated as a “serious opposition force” after Reform’s success in the local elections, where it narrowly won a byelection from Labour and took 677 council seats, gaining control of 10 councils. Reform took most seats from the Conservatives, who lost 674, while Labour lost 187.

Speaking to the BBC’s Laura Kuennsberg, Streeting said things “take time and you don’t turn around a country ... in just nine months. All I’d say to people is: we’ve got the message, we’re not daft, we haven’t got our heads in the sand. All I ask people for is a bit of time and to give us the benefit of the doubt ... We are going at those challenges as hard and fast as we can”.

He said Labour knew that people would “look for change elsewhere” if the country did not feel different by the next election and the government would “go further and faster” towards safer streets, more secure borders, waiting lists falling and the cost of living improving.

On Sky News, Streeting made clear that Reform was being taken seriously as an alternative challenger to the Conservatives. “I think Reform is definitely a real threat and one that we take seriously. I think there’s clearly, on the right of British politics, a realignment taking place,” he said.

“It’s not yet clear whether at the next general election it will be Reform or the Conservatives that are Labour’s main challengers, but we’ve got to take that threat seriously. In that spirit, I think Reform does deserve more airtime and scrutiny of their policies.”

Asked if he thought of Reform as Labour’s “most serious opposition”, he said: “I certainly do treat them as a serious opposition force.

“I don’t know whether it will be Reform or the Conservatives that emerge as the main threat. I don’t have a horse in that race, but like Alien vs. Predator, you don’t really want either one to win but one of them will emerge as the main challenger to Labour at the next general election.”

The Conservatives are also under pressure after the local election results. Kemi Badenoch, the Tory leader, rejected calls from local councillors for her to resign, when asked about her performance on the BBC’s Sunday with Laura Kuenssberg programme.



The Conservative party leader, Kemi Badenoch, told Laura Kuenssberg that ‘protest is in the air’. Photograph: Jeff Overs/PA

“What we had was Labour saying ‘all we need to do is get rid of the Conservatives and everything will be better’. Things got worse,” she said. “Now we have Reform saying ‘all we need to do is get rid of the Conservatives and Labour and everything will be better’. I suspect things will get worse, but protest is in the air.”

She said the Conservatives still had time to turn things around before the next election: “We live in politically volatile times and what I have been saying is that we are going to take a slow and steady way. There will be bumps along [the way] but we can do this, and we will do it in four years, not 18 years, 14 years, 13 years like the previous oppositions.”



Zia Yusuf, the Reform chair, said his party would show what it could do in local government and would be publishing a plan to deport people who have entered the country by illegal means in the first term of a Reform government.

He also defended his party's plans to cut diversity, equality and inclusion spending at local councils where Reform has taken control. Pressed on how much money this would save, he could not give an answer but he said Reform would bring in auditors and taskforces to cut unnecessary spending.

The party is now in control of 10 councils: Kent, Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire, North and West Northamptonshire, Lincolnshire, Staffordshire, Doncaster, Lancashire and Durham.

3. No 10 'completely tone deaf' on harm caused by winter fuel cut, critics say

Downing Street has been accused of being "completely tone deaf" over the damage wreaked by winter fuel cuts as new polling suggested two-thirds of voters would back a rethink on the policy.

Senior Labour ministers have privately warned the policy is an electoral disaster while Eluned Morgan, the Welsh first minister, said she was "losing patience" with UK Labour as she urged the government to think again.

The Labour peer Ayesha Hazarika, a former adviser to Ed Miliband when he was party leader, warned of the "anger and political damage" the policy had caused. "If the government wanted to show it was listening, this would be a good start," she said.

The veteran Labour MP Diane Abbott posted on X: "Reviewing it is not enough for pensioners. It is also not enough to restore Labour's battered reputation. The winter fuel allowance must be restored in full."

The Liberal Democrat deputy leader, Daisy Cooper, said the refusal to change course was "a completely tone deaf" response to the local elections.

"The public are rightly furious at the government's decision to rip vital support from millions of the most vulnerable, yet ministers simply are not listening."

Labour MPs from "red wall" constituencies, chaired by the Bassetlaw MP Jo White, issued a joint statement on Tuesday night demanding a major shift in economic strategy and a "break away from Treasury orthodoxy". They said the government must "act now before it is too late".

“Our voters told us loudly and clearly that we have not met their expectations. The response that the government will go further and faster on the ‘plan for change’ has fallen on deaf ears,” they added. The MPs urged a rethink of policies, including the winter fuel cut. “Responding to the issues raised by our constituents, including on winter fuel, isn’t weak – it takes us to a position of strength,” the statement said.

The MPs called on Starmer to spend more time in seats in the north and the Midlands. “This is our call for action: visit our areas, listen and rebuild the social contract between government and the people.

“The demands raised by new MPs from post-industrial towns where infrastructure is poor with years of underinvestment must be taken off the too-difficult-to-do list.

“The government needs to improve messaging by telling our story and articulating our values in the language that resonates and is heard.

“Labour cannot afford to lose the red wall again as it reopens the route to a future of opposition and an existential crisis. Without red wall communities, we are not the Labour party.”

Keir Starmer’s senior team has been discussing how to handle public anger over the policy and, while a full reversal is not expected, they have been considering raising the £11,500 threshold over which pensioners are no longer eligible.

No 10 mounted an operation to shut down speculation that it could tweak the policy on Tuesday, with the prime minister’s spokesperson telling reporters there would be “no change” despite political and public pressure to do so.

“The government has set out its policies and the reasons behind these policies. There is no change to the government policy,” he added.

A No 10 source said that raising the threshold would require an increasing eligibility for pension credit, which would wipe out any savings.

However, Wes Streeting, the health secretary, said the government was “reflecting” on the message it had been sent by voters as he admitted that winter fuel cuts had been an issue on the doorstep.

It came as polling from More in Common found two-thirds of voters would back a full U-turn on the policy, including 75% of Reform voters, 68% of Labour voters and 84% of those who back the Tories. Increasing the threshold was supported by 63% of all voters.

In findings that could bolster those inside government advocating a rethink, six in 10 people said they would think better of the government if it reinstated the full winter fuel allowance, rising to two-thirds among those who had abandoned Labour since the election – while only one in five said they would think worse of it.

Exactly half of voters said they would see the government as stronger if it increased the minimum income at which people could receive the winter fuel payment, including 57% of Labour switchers.

Crucially, people were twice as likely to say a reversal on winter fuel would make the government look stronger rather than weaker, suggesting that the idea a U-turn would be politically damaging may be misplaced.

The prime minister’s press secretary said the government would not be “blown off course” after the local election results, despite growing anxiety at the top of the party that the policy could wreak serious electoral damage.

The issue was discussed around the cabinet table on Tuesday. “I was really clear that most prime ministers, after a disappointing set of results like that, would get in the warm bath of saying: ‘Well, it’s the electoral cycle, it was close,’” Starmer said.

“I’m not going to do that. I think it’s really important that we indicate to voters that we get it.

“I think we need to explain the decisions that we’ve taken. We had to stop the chaos, we had to stabilise our economy and that’s what we’ve done.”

4. Reform's green energy assault in Lincolnshire 'puts 12,200 jobs at risk'

Reform UK's plans to obstruct green energy projects in Lincolnshire put at risk almost £1bn in local investment and more than 12,000 jobs, analysis suggests.

No 10 said it would fight any attempt by the party to dismantle or block renewable investment in the area, after its deputy leader, Richard Tice, said Reform-controlled councils and its mayors would be able to block what he called "net stupid zero" infrastructure, including solar farms, pylons and battery storage systems.

In Greater Lincolnshire, net zero industries contribute about £980m to the local economy, accounting for 12,209 jobs, according to analysis by the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit (ECIU).

Tice said: "We will attack, we will hinder, we will delay, we will obstruct, we will put every hurdle in your way. It's going to cost you a fortune, and you're not going to win. So give up and go away."

The Reform mayor for Lincolnshire, Andrea Jenkyns, as well as the county council, which is also controlled by the rightwing party, would be able to block and delay renewable projects, experts said.

Jenkyns has claimed carbon dioxide is "not pollution", called for the "ditching" of net zero and declared that Lincolnshire will "not be a dumping ground for pylons", as well as campaigning against solar farms.

Melanie Onn, the Labour MP for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes, said: "Reform's war on the green economy is actually a war on jobs and investment and flies in the face of what hard-working businesses and families need. Reform's dangerous plan is a threat to British jobs and British workers.

"Now Reform have a platform in Greater Lincolnshire, they must come clean on whether they're prepared to risk damaging the local economy and risk making thousands of workers unemployed."

Though larger solar farms over 100MW are classed as nationally significant infrastructure projects (NSIPs) and therefore decided on by Ed Miliband, the energy secretary, anything below that is subject to the Town and Country Planning Act (TCPA) and goes through a local application and approval process.

These can also be "called in" by the secretary of state, but the process of calling in can add time and expense that smaller projects may not be able to weather.

Battery storage systems, which Tice has also said Reform UK will block, were taken out of the NSIP programme by the previous Conservative government, meaning they are also subject to the TCPA but can be called in.

However, pylon networks – which are the most controversial infrastructure locally – cannot be stopped by Reform if they are more than 2km long and carry 132,000 volts or more.

Shaun Spiers, the executive director of the thinktank Green Alliance, said: "Of course, any sensible developer will want to win local support for renewable projects, and most work hard to do so. What is really odd is Richard Tice's apparent determination to drive up energy costs and increase our dependence on imported fossil fuels. That might please Reform UK's funders, but it's unlikely to please its voters."

One possible route for Reform politicians to stop projects such as pylons and large solar farms is through the judicial review process, though the planning and infrastructure bill aims to make the challenges harder.

Legal challenges can add huge costs to projects, particularly as under the Aarhus convention it is inexpensive for the person or group bringing the court case, and there is no legal cost cover for the project if the applicant loses the case.

Sam Richards, the chief executive of the campaign group Britain Remade, said the judicial review system needed to be overhauled in order to stop vexatious complaints and that the planning bill could allow ministers to go even further. "People in Britain are fed up with the red tape that stops us from

getting anything done. The last thing we need is more councils trying to block businesses from building the vital energy infrastructure we need.”

Lincolnshire is the most at risk county in England from environmental damage in the built environment, according to analysis, with Tice representing the seat most at risk of severe floods. Last year, farmland across the county was hit by flooding, resulting in huge losses for farmers. The Met Office says these floods are being made more likely by climate breakdown.

Contrary to what some of the party’s leaders say, most Reform voters do support climate action. The majority support new wind and solar farms and policies to tackle the climate crisis, according to polling this month by the ECIU.

RenewableUK’s executive director of policy, Ana Musat, said: “Any blanket ban on renewables would be costly for bill payers – the ban on onshore wind cost £5.1bn in the financial year before it was lifted – that’s £182 for every UK household.”

Greenpeace UK’s head of politics, Ami McCarthy, said Reform had “peddled lies and weaponised the issue in the area” and there was a risk that smaller developers and community energy projects would be hit particularly hard.

Asked if central government would intervene to help green energy projects get built in Reform-run areas, Keir Starmer’s spokesperson said it would. “We will always be on the side of the builders, not the blockers. We will always be looking at decisions that are going to deliver lower energy bills, higher growth, higher living standards and more jobs around the country. That was the agenda that the government was elected to deliver on.”

5. Welsh Labour first minister says she is ‘losing patience’ with Starmer’s policies

The Welsh first minister and leader of the Welsh Labour party has said she is “losing patience” with UK Labour and made it clear she was “tacking to the left” as she tries to counter a growing threat from Reform UK and Plaid Cymru.

Eluned Morgan told the Guardian she wanted Keir Starmer to rethink policy changes on welfare and the winter fuel allowance, and described the Labour party as a “messy family”.

Morgan argued that while the UK party had time to turn its fortunes around, the task was more urgent in Wales because the Senedd elections were only a year away.

Her comments came as an opinion poll suggested Labour was trailing in third place in Wales behind Plaid and Reform UK, with its worst vote share – 18% – since devolution a quarter of a century ago.

Morgan said of the poll: “That is a wake-up call, if ever we’ve seen one. It is a serious challenge for us. It’s a serious challenge for UK Labour. We all need to think very seriously about delivery on the things that matter to people the most.”

The first minister spoke after a passionate speech launching the election campaign and what she called a “red Welsh way”. She said: “We’ve got a year to go and I’m losing patience. They [UK Labour] are very keen for us to promote partnership in power. We are keen to play with them when it comes to partnership in power and it’s already delivered £1.6bn extra for our public services, but it’s not enough and we need to see more from them.

“And time is ticking for us. They’ve got time to turn things around. We have very little time to turn things around in Wales. So our patience is running out.

“I’m determined to make a change for the people of Wales and I haven’t got much time. I am impatient. I need things done. We’re tacking to the left here, we’re saying that we want to make sure that the centre of gravity in Wales is to the left.”

Morgan said there was no split with UK Labour but compared the party to a “messy family”. She said: “We all come from families that are complicated these days and we fall out within our families but

we're still family. We still turn up to each other's weddings and funerals but in between there may be a bit of a falling out and that's not the end of the world."

As well as appealing to UK Labour to think again about welfare cuts and removing the winter fuel allowance, she called for the UK government not to interfere with areas of policy devolved to Wales.

She said: "What we need is respect for devolution. When the Tories were in charge, they disrespected the devolution settlement. We're a bit concerned that's continued under Labour. We need devolution to be respected because it was hard fought for and it is the settled will of the Welsh people."

Morgan described Reform UK as "dangerous". She said: "I think it is catching hold in some of our communities. I think there's a danger that the left vote will split and will allow Reform in, which is why my appeal today to the left in Wales is to say: these are our values. We have the red Welsh way, which is a more leftwing approach than the UK government approach.

"We are a party whose values sit further with the left and that's why we're standing up against things like those benefit cuts. I don't think cuts is what's going to get them back into the workplace."

During an hour-long speech at the Norwegian church arts centre in Cardiff, Morgan repeatedly emphasised the "red Welsh way", an echo of the former first minister Rhodri Morgan's phrase "clear red water" when he described his relationship with Tony Blair's Labour government.

She said: "We'll be leaning into our red Welsh way of doing things. Red, the colour of our rugby and football shirts, the colour of our dragon, the colour of our party and our politics."

Morgan said next year's elections to the Welsh parliament were "a battle for the future of Wales". She called Reform UK loud and showy. She said: "They provide an easy story because they're new and they're disruptive. They want to use Wales to make a point in the English press. Their leader, Farage, who's on record as admiring Putin and sucking up to Trump, he'd happily dismantle our NHS and sell off our public services.

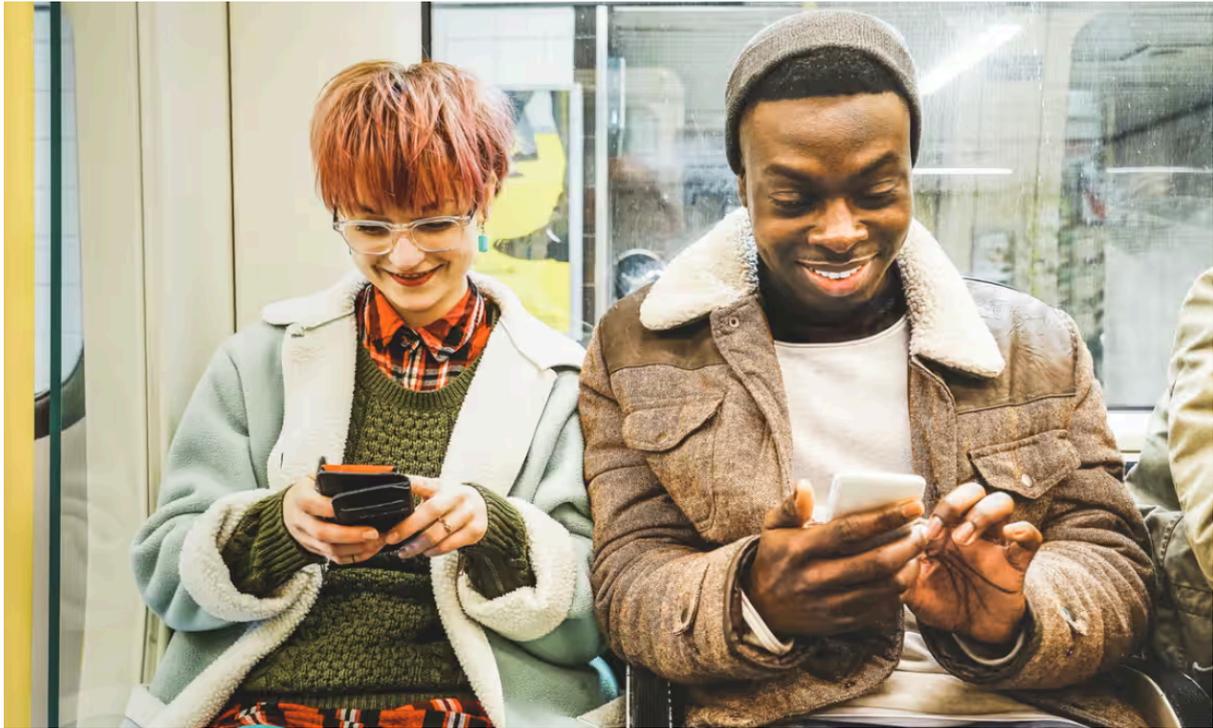
"Anyone tempted by Reform, my message to you is simple: come home to the party that built the NHS, that stands by our local councils, carers, health workers, teachers, pensioners and the working people of Wales." She said a vote for Plaid risked letting Reform UK in.

During the speech, Morgan called Starmer a "serious person" who had "reset" the UK government's relationship with the Welsh administration. But she added: "I am proudly married to my nation and I'm going to put my nation first, ahead of the extended family – nation and the people of Wales before party for me."

The Barn Cymru poll, conducted by YouGov for ITV Cymru Wales and Cardiff University, put Plaid's predicted vote share at next year's Senedd elections at 30%, with Reform UK on 25%, Labour at 18% and the Conservatives at 13%.

6. Lib Dems back ban on playing music and videos on public transport in England

A party of party poopers? Or defenders of the "quiet majority"? Either way, the Liberal Democrats are redefining "political battlebus" by proposing a ban on people playing music and videos out loud on their phones on public transport.



Under the plan, those who blast out songs and TV shows from their phone on public transport, or while at stations or bus stops, could face a maximum fine of £1,000.

The party is proposing an amendment to the bus services bill, which is now going through parliament, that would make this an offence. As transport policy is devolved, this would apply to England only.

If the law was changed, the ban would be promoted through a national publicity campaign. Some other countries have already imposed such bans. Earlier this year a man was fined €200 (£170) by rail staff after making a phone call on loudspeaker in a quiet area of Nantes station in France. He is challenging the penalty.

To back up the idea, the Lib Dems commissioned polling that showed 38% of people said they had experienced people playing loud music from their phones often or sometimes, with 28% saying this had happened rarely.

The polling, by Savanta, found that 54% of people said they would not feel comfortable asking someone to turn down their music on public transport, rising to 63% among women.

Lisa Smart, the party's home affairs spokesperson, said: "Far too many people dread their daily commute because of the blight of antisocial behaviour – and headphone dodgers playing loud music on buses and trains are some of the worst offenders.

"Whether you're heading to work, taking your kids to school or simply trying to enjoy a moment of peace, everyone deserves to feel safe and respected on public transport.

"Time and time again, I hear from people who say they feel too intimidated to speak up when someone is blasting music or other content from a phone or speaker. It's time to take a stand for the quiet majority who just want to get from A to B in peace."

The Conservatives said they would back the idea, as long as any ban was properly enforced. Gareth Bacon, the shadow transport secretary, said: "Everyone deserves to travel in peace. Playing loud music on public transport may seem like a small thing, but it speaks towards a growing tolerance of antisocial behaviour that chips away at public civility."

Railway bylaws already prohibit antisocial behaviour such as littering and the amendment would set out that music or other loud noise from a phone would also be categorised in the same vein.

7. Lib Dems hoping anti-Trump stance will give them boost in local elections

The Liberal Democrats are stepping up their anti-Donald Trump messaging this weekend in the hope of using dislike of the US president among Tory and Labour voters to make big gains in England's council and mayoral elections on 1 May.

Ed Davey's party believes it could overtake the Tories in terms of the number of councils under its control, partly by highlighting the reluctance of Keir Starmer and Kemi Badenoch to criticise Trump on issues such as tariffs, his dealings with Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, over the war in Ukraine and his attitude to the Israel-Gaza crisis.

With global stock markets tumbling after Trump's imposition of punitive tariffs on the rest of the world last Wednesday, the local elections are set to take place in a period of economic uncertainty unmatched since the outbreak of the Covid pandemic.

While local government issues will inevitably still dominate on 1 May, Trump's actions are now rebounding directly on ordinary voters, not just in the US but internationally, as the economic clouds gather and the value of their pensions and other savings become far less certain.

Yesterday – as her party continues to look for novel ways to engineer a “Trump bump” on 1 May – a Liberal Democrat MP called for a special visa route to allow Americans fleeing the Trump presidency to come to the UK.

Christine Jardine said she wanted to see a potential “fast lane” for skilled US citizens and presented a motion to that effect to the Scottish Liberal Democrat conference in Inverness, which was backed by party members.

It called for a new customs union with the EU and a summit of Commonwealth nations to respond to US tariffs.

Next month's elections will be challenging for Starmer and Labour, with the economy struggling, but also for the Tories, who performed very strongly when many of the same seats were last up for election in 2021 off the back of the Covid “vaccine bounce”, when then prime minister Boris Johnson and his party enjoyed its period of peak popularity.

These elections are also seen as the biggest electoral test to date for Nigel Farage's Reform UK, which is fielding more than 1,600 candidates and has topped some national polls over recent weeks.

With the other main parties, except the Greens, reluctant to censure Trump, and with most UK voters critical of him, the Lib Dems announced that they will call for a vote in parliament on any trade deal that the UK government tries to strike with the US president, as it attempts to avoid the worst of his tariffs and the developing global trade war.

With Tory voters in southern and home counties council areas in mind, the party says it fears an attempt to “sell out British farmers and weaken the UK's online safety laws” may be offered to Trump. Any such deal, the Lib Dems will demand, will have to be examined and voted on by MPs before being signed.

The party's move comes amid reports that the government is planning to water down online safety laws, which help keep children safe on the internet, as part of a deal. Trump has also called for bans by the UK on imports of US beef, chicken and pork to be dropped, raising fears that products that do not meet UK food standards and that would undermine Britain's farmers, could flood into the country. It is also expected that the UK government will lower levies on US social media giants by reducing the digital services tax, which raises more than £800m a year.

Davey has used recent sessions of prime minister's questions to demand that Starmer take a tougher stand against Trump – which he has refused to do.



Daisy Cooper, deputy leader of the Liberal Democrats, said parliament must be able to vote on any trade deal with Donald Trump. Photograph: House of Commons/PA

The Lib Dems' deputy leader, Daisy Cooper, said: "MPs must be given a say on any government deal with Donald Trump. It would be deeply undemocratic if parliament were to be sidelined on such a critical issue for the country.

"Both Conservative and Labour MPs should commit now to voting down any Trump deal that sells out British farmers and their high food standards or waters down our online safety rules. The government must not use our high food and animal welfare standards or the online safety of our children as pawns in a negotiation to appease Donald Trump." Ministers say talks are continuing with the US to try to secure a wider economic deal that could exempt the UK from the worst of the US-induced trade war.

On Friday, the financial markets plunged further after China announced retaliatory tariffs in an escalating trade war.

About 1,650 seats will be contested on 1 May, 14 county councils, eight unitary authorities, one metropolitan district, and in the Isles of Scilly.

There will also be mayoral elections in the west of England, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and – for the first time - in Hull and East Yorkshire, and in Greater Lincolnshire.

Last month Reform launched by far its biggest and "most ambitious" local election campaign yet as it looks to turn poll momentum into council seats.

While the party has been on the rise since the general election last July, it has recently been destabilised by a row that saw Rupert Lowe, one of the five Reform MPs elected last year, expelled from the party. Reform will contest most of the 1,600 council seats up for re-election after his assault conviction. Party leader Nigel Farage told a rally in Birmingham the local elections were the "first major hurdle" on Reform's road to power.

The Lib Dems, meanwhile, are targeting Conservative-run councils up for election in May, including those in Shropshire, Oxfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Wiltshire, Devon and Gloucestershire.

The Lib Dems now have majority control of 37 councils, short of the 49 held by the Tories, across the UK.

At the Lib Dems' local election campaign launch, Davey voters were "deeply disappointed" with the Labour government, which he said had "failed to deliver the change they promised". The Lib Dem leader also said Farage and Reform were "too busy fighting among themselves to fix the problems we face".



Reform UK leader Nigel Farage has called May's local elections 'the first major hurdle' on his party's road to power. Photograph: Joe Giddens/PA

8. 'Tories are not listening': Ed Davey sure Lib Dems can woo more disgruntled voters

Days before the local elections, with Kemi Badenoch demanding apologies over gender identity and Nigel Farage complaining about mental illness diagnoses, Ed Davey was quietly getting on with what he perhaps does best: having fun.

In a converted shed near Stratford-upon-Avon, the Liberal Democrat leader was joking with photographers as he made chocolate truffles alongside Manuela Perteghella, his party's MP for the formerly true-blue constituency.

The council, Warwickshire, is also about as Conservative as it gets, and currently has 41 Tory councillors out of 57. But privately, Lib Dem activists say it could move into no overall control next week.

"I think it feels even better than the general election," Davey said, truffles cooling in a fridge before he headed off for some door-knocking. And this, remember, was the Lib Dems' best general election for a century, in which – helped in part by Davey's succession of camera-friendly stunts – the party won 72 seats, mostly from the Conservatives.

With much of the focus before the local elections on Reform UK's rise and the impact this could have on Labour, the Lib Dems have just been, as one party strategist called it, "getting on with the job".

Part of this is the sheer graft so admired by Farage that he wants to use it as a model for Reform, with 500,000 doors knocked on during March, and 1m leaflets delivered before election spending limits kicked in.

But also to the Lib Dems' advantage is that many of next Thursday's battles take place in traditionally Conservative counties, where the Tories won heavily amid the brief if spectacular Boris Johnson vaccine bounce of 2021, the last time they were contested.

According to Davey, the general election trend of less ideologically minded Conservative voters fleeing a party they see as overly weighted towards populism and culture wars has shown no signs of slowing under Badenoch.

"People who were lifelong Conservatives haven't forgiven them, they're not impressed by the leader, and some are put off by this talk of some sort of arrangement with Reform," he said.



Ed Davey helping local campaigners maintain a chalk stream of the River Chess in Chesham, Buckinghamshire. Photograph: Tolga Akmen/EPA

Things are not entirely the same as they were last July, however. One paradox of the spectacular general election result is that in some places, including Warwickshire, the Lib Dems have reversed their usual tactic of patiently building up a mass of councillors before making a tilt at the parliamentary seat.

Instead, as in Warwickshire, they hope to use a surprise parliamentary win – Perteghella overcame a 20,000 Conservative majority to win by 7,000 votes – to create momentum for the council.

Plus there is the advent of some early Lib Dem-Reform battles, notably for the new mayoralty in Hull and East Yorkshire. While Davey is making no predictions, he is scornful about Farage’s success thus far in building up a Lib Dem-style on-the-ground army.

“This is just anecdotal, but Reform have tried door-knocking one or two places, and they got such a hostile reception from quite a lot of doors, they quickly give up. So they’re not fighting the campaign that we do.”

But the bulk of the party’s targets of councils to potentially win – Oxfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Devon, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire – or to make gains, such as Warwickshire, Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire, are still mainly in the once Tory-loyal commuter belt areas loosely known as the “blue wall”.

Davey, who gets recognised more regularly on doorsteps after his bungee jumping and water sliding of the general election, faces a Conservative party that seems vastly more focused on tackling Reform than trying to win back the voters and seats taken by the Lib Dems.

Asked if he is surprised at this, Davey said: “Well, not really, given the MPs they’ve got. All the moderate Conservatives, the liberal conservatives, one-nation Conservatives, pro-European Conservatives, they’ve all gone.”

In their place are people such as Badenoch, who memorably dismissed the Lib Dems as people who spurn social media to instead focus on “fixing their church roof”, a quote party insiders delightedly say could not have been phrased better if they had written it themselves.

“The Conservatives are in a bit of a bubble, aren’t they?” Davey said. “They’re talking to themselves. They’re certainly not listening to the public. It’s the fact that they inhabit an X-sphere, if you like, a Twitter-sphere.”

While some Tories argue that a pact with Reform would instantly give this new rightwing block a combined vote share well over 40%, Lib Dem insiders say they are unworried, saying any deal would

make the Conservatives even more toxic to many voters, and inspire fervent tactical voting to keep them out.

“They will decide what they want to do about a pact, but I think there would be a huge number of traditional Conservatives who would be appalled at that process,” Davey said. “I think they would look round for a different home, and see the Liberal Democrats as that home.”

9. Reform UK councillors face allegations of sharing far-right and Islamophobic content

Up to 12 newly elected Reform UK councillors are facing allegations of sharing social media content ranging from support for the far right to explicitly Islamophobic comments.

They include councillors at three different county councils who have shared social media content from Britain First, a far-right party known for staging provocative marches and stunts.

A week after Reform’s local elections breakthrough, in which it won 677 of more than 1,600 seats contested, the backgrounds of its winning councillors are under scrutiny after the party largely sought to deflect allegations during the campaign.

The councillors accused of retweeting Britain First content include Paul Harrison, who was elected to Leicestershire county council. He retweeted and said “yes” to a question posed on X by Britain First’s chair who asked if followers supported mass deportations and posted an AI-generated picture of Muslim men with Pakistani flags.



Paul Golding, left, the leader of Britain First at a ‘stop the boats’ protest in Dover. Photograph: Gareth Fuller/PA

Russell Cherry, elected as a councillor in Thurrock, allegedly retweeted Paul Golding, who is Britain First’s leader and has a conviction for religiously aggravated harassment. Ivan Dabbs, a Reform councillor in West Northamptonshire, also allegedly shared a Britain First tweet and material by Golding calling for a street demonstration.

The off-the-shelf vetting software used by Reform UK before the elections was from Ferretly, a US social media startup founded in 2019, the Guardian has learned. The platform assesses digital red flags, including hate speech, disparaging or bullying behaviour and inflammatory rhetoric, along with connections to extremist groups or individuals.

However, Reform has drawn criticism for its reliance on the platform after its leadership claimed to have the “most in-depth vetting procedure” of any party. In an interview with Times Radio on 30 April, Nigel Farage said vetting was done internally using “AI techniques and other things” to “give us a bit of a shortcut”.

Neither the Conservatives nor Labour rely on AI software to the same degree. In the case of the Tories, a 30-strong group was involved in vetting each of its general election candidates.

By Thursday, Reform was known to have lost at least three of its elected councillors. They included Donna Edmunds, a councillor in Shropshire who was suspended on Wednesday after she said that she planned to defect from the party.

Edmunds, a supporter of Rupert Lowe who was kicked out of Reform and has been engaged in a bitter row with Farage, accused the Reform leader of treating members with contempt and described the party as a cult.

Luke Shingler, who was elected in Warwickshire, said he would be an independent councillor for the “next 18 months” because his work meant he was unable to serve under a political organisation. Shingler is understood to work for the RAF. A third councillor, Desmond Clarke, has resigned from Nottinghamshire county council, triggering a byelection.

Many of the alleged social media posts by Reform councillors were unearthed by the counter-extremism campaign group Hope Not Hate.

Georgie Laming, Hope Not Hate’s director of campaigns, said: “Nigel Farage has claimed that Reform UK have the ‘most in-depth vetting procedure’ of any party. Our investigation shows that their processes leave much to be desired.

“Not only have they admitted using ‘AI techniques and other things’ to do the vetting, but Reform UK continue to shirk responsibility for their candidates’ online behaviour. They have yet to drop any of the candidates that have been exposed,” she said.

Hope Not Hate uncovered Reform candidates – some now elected – who posted anti-Muslim hate, pushed far-right conspiracies including calling the climate crisis a “globalist hysterical climate hoax”, praising extremists such as Tommy Robinson and sharing content from David Irving, the UK’s best known Holocaust denier.

Reform has been approached for comment.

10. Reform UK to resist housing asylum seekers in its council areas, chair says

Reform UK has vowed to use “every instrument of power” to resist housing people seeking asylum in areas where it now controls councils, its chair has confirmed.

Zia Yusuf, the party chair and a major donor, acknowledged Reform may not be able to stop people seeking asylum being put up in hotels where the Home Office has contracts with accommodation providers.

However, he said the party would use “judicial reviews, injunctions, planning laws” in an effort to prevent them being accommodated.

“You know, a lot of these hotels – there has been litigation around this already – a lot of these hotels, when you suddenly turn them into something else, which is essentially a hostel that falls foul of any number of regulations, and that’s what our teams of lawyers are exploring at the moment,” Yusuf told the BBC One’s Sunday with Laura Kuenssberg programme.

Yusuf’s comments were made after Nigel Farage, Reform’s leader, said he would “resist” those seeking asylum being housed in the 10 council areas where his party had taken control after winning more than 670 seats overall in Thursday’s local elections.

Since then, Reform has come under scrutiny over some of its promises to slash spending at councils and prevent the housing of asylum seekers. The party has said it wants to cut diversity, equality and

inclusion (DEI) officers and work at the councils it controls, despite this being a very small part of their budgets, with most money spent on social care and education.

Yusuf said Reform would introduce taskforces to audit spending in the councils where it had won control and suggested the party would be digging into what local authority job roles involved in order to cut costs.

“If you take Lincolnshire county council, yes, they do not currently have somebody with the job title ‘DEI officer’, [but] they do spend considerable money on DEI initiatives,” he said.

Yusuf said the party was “realistic” about the fact the levers of change at a local level “pale in comparison” to the powers of Westminster. “That’s why this is part of a journey to making Nigel the prime minister with a Reform majority,” he said.

Andrea Jenkyns, Reform’s new Greater Lincolnshire mayor and a former Conservative MP, also confirmed her suggestion that immigrants could be housed in tents, saying the UK was “acting like bees to honey by putting people in hotels”.

“This is taxpayers’ money and it should actually be tents, not rent,” the former Tory minister told LBC.

Jenkyns also said she wanted to cut up to 10% of Lincolnshire county council’s staff and “root out the waste” at the local authority.

“I think, personally, [we] ought to look at maybe cutting the workforce by up to 10%. We’ve got to have a lean, mean local government. That’s what I personally like to see, but again there’s variables there, because we haven’t elected a Reform county council leader yet, so there’s got to be discussions.”

Jenkyns also said she was “up for a fight” with the unions, after the head of Unison urged staff at Reform-run councils to join them and secure union protection.

11. Reform UK challenged to give details on donations after £2m mailshot campaign

The Liberal Democrats have publicly challenged Nigel Farage to give details of his party’s donations after calculating that Reform UK spent more than £2m on personalised letters to postal voters before the local elections.

In a letter to Farage, Daisy Cooper, the Lib Dem deputy leader, said people needed to know the source of the money before Thursday’s elections, given that Reform received only £281,000 in donations in the last set of publicly available figures, for the final quarter of 2024.

Noting that Reform’s treasurer, Nick Candy, said last week that the party was targeting wealthy donors in low-tax overseas destinations such as Monaco, Cooper said Farage should “publicly rule out accepting any donations from wealthy donors linked to Russia or the Trump administration”.

In response, Reform said the campaign was being primarily funded by smaller donations, which do not need to be declared, and by its income from membership subscriptions.

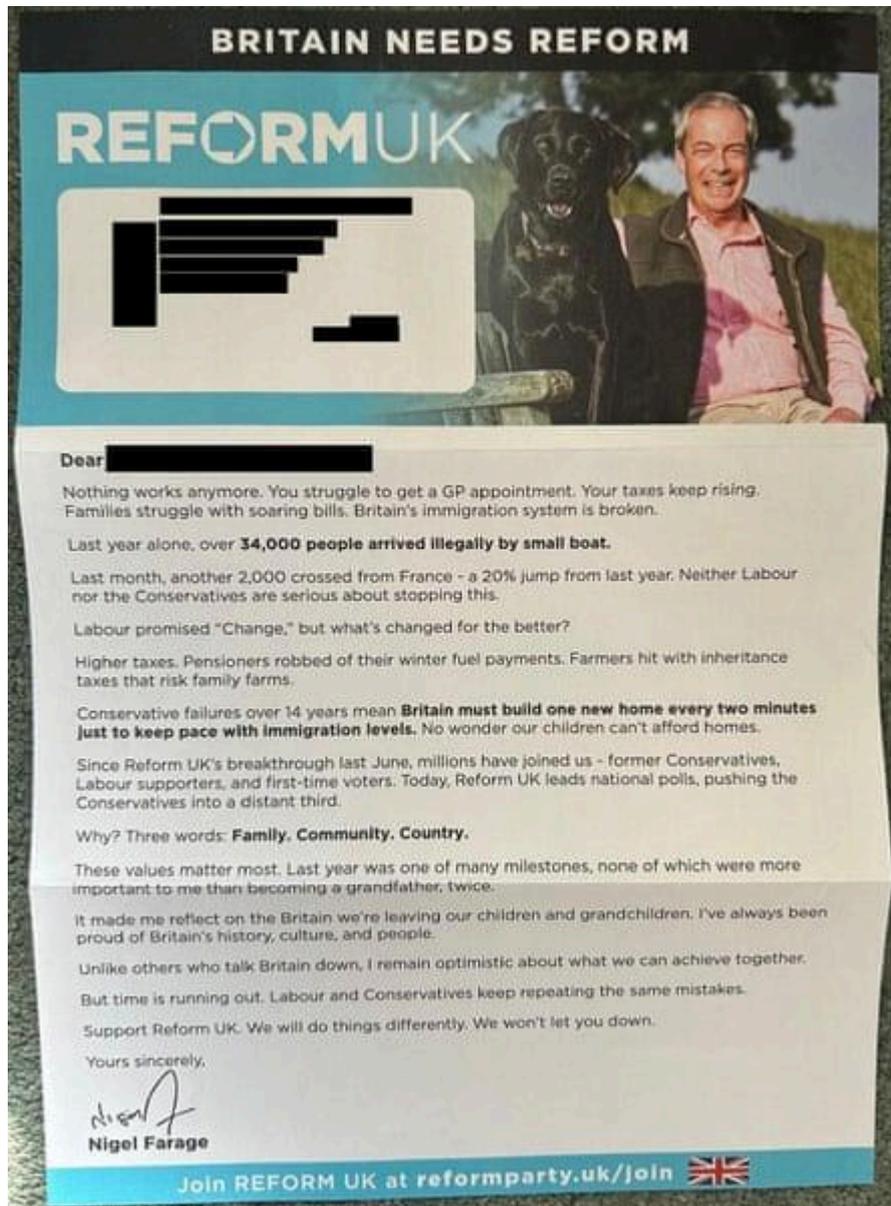
Farage has promised to professionalise his party on the lines of the Lib Dems, who are famed for a relentless electioneering machine based on thousands of volunteers who knock on doors and deliver vast numbers of leaflets.

However, while Reform now has a large membership, it appears to still have a limited on-the-ground campaigning infrastructure, with the gap filled during the local election campaign with large numbers of paid-for leaflets mailed to voters.

The Lib Dems say Reform has sent two personalised direct mail messages from Farage to each of the 1.9 million people registered as postal voters for this round of local and mayoral elections across England, estimating this would cost about £2.1m.

This is the latest example of Reform’s increased resources, particularly in recent months.

In March, Farage launched the party's campaign with a rally, for which Reform hired out an arena in Birmingham that was decorated with carefully created props intended to convey the party's message about a "broken" country, including a closed-down pub, a neglected bus stop and roads littered with potholes.



A personalised letter sent out by Reform UK. Photograph: Supplied

The mailouts feature a photo of Farage sitting next to a dog, with its text blaming migration for problems including a lack of housing and NHS waiting lists.

Under the law, parties have to declare donations of £500 or more to the Electoral Commission. The watchdog's latest data, for donations in the last quarter of 2024, was released in March and showed Reform raised £280,000 over that period.

Candy, a wealthy property developer, took over as Reform's treasurer in December, with the party boasting that he would help bring in significant donations. However, it is not yet known whether this has happened, and if so where the money comes from.

Under electoral laws, individuals can only donate if they are on the UK electoral register. A change to the law passed under the Conservatives allowed people to do this even if they have lived outside the

UK for more than 15 years, allowing Reform more scope to seek money from people based in places such as Monaco.

Cooper's letter to Farage says she is writing "to request clarity over the sources of funding for Reform UK's local election campaign", noting the likely cost of the direct mail campaign, and Reform's reported donations.

She wrote: "The Electoral Commission will not publish information on donations for the first quarter of 2025 until after polling day on 1 May. That means that voters will not know the potential sources of funding for your party's local election campaign before they cast their votes.

"So will you publicly rule out accepting any donations from wealthy donors linked to Russia or the Trump administration? And will you do that before this week's local elections?"

A Reform spokesperson said: "The figures published by the Electoral Commission are large donations only. Our outstanding election campaign has been funded by Reform members, and grassroots small donors.

"Reform has two-and-a-half times as many members as the Liberal Democrats, so we understand how this would be an alien concept to them – 225,000 members x £25 per year is £5.6m."

12. 'Extinction-level event': Tories fear voters turning to Reform in Lincolnshire

On the gravel pathway of Aggie Chapman's home in the village of West Deeping, a conversation about Lincolnshire's upcoming elections suddenly shifted from opposition to a local quarry to worries about nuclear Armageddon.

"World politics is so frightening right now that it's all very well worrying about what's happening in our back garden – and yes we don't want the quarry here – but it's kind of insignificant if we end up going into world war three," she told Conservative canvassers including the local MP, John Hayes. She mentioned the experience of her daughter, a nurse, during the pandemic as an example of global instability.

Minutes earlier, Hayes had confidently repeated the adage that "all politics is local" as he knocked on doors with Robert Waltham, an experienced local government leader who is the party's mayoral candidate to head the newly created Greater Lincolnshire combined county authority.

Yet in doorstep conversations with Conservative voters such as Chapman there was a glimpse of shifting national political foment as the party faces a serious challenge from Reform UK for more than 1,600 government seats across England.



The MP John Hayes (front) campaigning in West Deeping. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

The mayoral race is a key bellwether, effectively a three-way between Waltham, Labour's Jason Stockwood, who is a former chair of Grimsby Town football club, and Andrea Jenkyns, a former Conservative MP who defected to Nigel Farage's party.

The GLCCA area covering Lincolnshire is almost England's electoral map in microcosm, welding together traditionally Labour-leaning industrial towns such as Scunthorpe in the north with farmland and prosperous market towns to the south including Grantham, popular with London commuters.

In one of the most Eurosceptic parts of Britain, which already has one Reform MP in Boston, Richard Tice, Farage's party should theoretically gain in Labour areas such as Grimsby and in Tory heartlands if his party's "prime minister in waiting" spin has any foundation.

An Electoral Calculus poll for the Telegraph suggested that while Reform would capture all the council seats on the Lincolnshire coast, the Tories should retain control of the county council.

However, the Guardian understands that internal Conservative polling suggests the party is neck and neck with Reform in parts of Lincolnshire's affluent south, where Kemi Badenoch's party should be nailed on to win. In a contest where turnout is expected to be well below even last year's general election – the second lowest in more a 100 years – historically more active rural voters could matter even more.



West Deeping resident Aggie Chapman says of Nigel Farage: 'He terrifies me – he's just Trump with a British accent.' Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

Some comfort for Badenoch can be found in Chapman and her neighbour Dominic Brownlow, Tory voters in West Deeping who endorsed Waltham's track record in local government, while reflecting a residual distrust of Farage's party. "He terrifies me – he's just Trump with a British accent," said Chapman.

Nevertheless, Reform has clearly been cutting through elsewhere, where an anti-net zero message it has been honing at a national level has found receptive ears across swathes of Lincolnshire where villages are at odds with large-scale plans to site solar farms and battery farms.

Jenkyns, whose other policies include a promise to cut supposed bureaucratic waste by introducing a Lincolnshire version of the "department of government efficiency" (Doge) led by Elon Musk in the US – has been campaigning hard up and down a corridor of villages and towns where plans for pylons and green energy infrastructure have met opposition.

They include the picturesque village of Scopwick, which local campaigners say faces being surrounded on three sides by solar farms.

“Pretty much as far as the eye can see you will just see solar panels and the opposition to that is overwhelming,” said Marc Williams, who is involved in running a campaign against the solar project in an area where anti-Labour sentiment runs deep.

“No one who I speak to would shed a tear if anything happened to Ed Miliband. He’s turned into a net zero zealot,” said Williams, who also castigated Dale Vince, the Labour donor behind solar farm projects elsewhere in Lincolnshire. But while he noted Tory opposition to the plans, like others he had long since left the party behind in favour of Reform.



Marc Williams, a member of the Springwell Solar Action Group, with his collection of protest placards at home at Scopwick. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

Other variables also make the Lincolnshire mayoral and local elections unpredictable.

For example, how much of a fillip could Labour get from saving Scunthorpe’s steel plant? How much damage is being done to Jenkyns by Tory attacks on her for living in Leeds, the location of her former parliamentary constituency? Reform claims the allegations are “vexatious and politically motivated”, but she will reportedly face a statutory hearing into claims she is not eligible to stand.

“I have experience of actually running local government here and I live here, as my family has done for generations, whereas Reform have parachuted in someone,” said Waltham.

But local Conservatives are spooked. One Tory source said: “Reform have no meaningful ground operation or data, but they are pouring money in.”

They added: “Across Lincolnshire, Reform are polling at 60%. I don’t believe that but lots of activists and councillors are going into this thinking that this is an extinction-level event.

“There’s also a strain of thought which says the only way we can lance the boil of Reform is to let them control and screw stuff up. Now, they might not screw it up, but if that’s where we’re at it’s pretty desperate.”

13. Polls close for local and mayoral elections in England and byelection result due

Polls have closed across England for local and mayoral elections, as well as a key parliamentary byelection, with the first results due to be announced within hours.

It is the first full-scale electoral test for Keir Starmer since the general election, and could have notable repercussions for Nigel Farage and Kemi Badenoch, as well as to a lesser extent for the Liberal Democrats and Greens.

The elections cover 24 councils across England, as well as six mayoralties and a byelection in the formerly Labour-held seat of Runcorn and Helsby in Cheshire, which is being closely contested by Reform UK.

The first results, expected at about 2am, will be for two of the mayoral races: North Tyneside, which Labour is expected to hold, and West of England, which was previously held by Labour but is seen as being a close race between Labour, the Greens and Lib Dems.

About an hour later will be perhaps the key result of the night, with voters in Runcorn and Helsby deciding who will succeed Mike Amesbury, the former Labour MP who resigned after being given a suspended prison sentence for punching a man. Bookmakers have Reform as the favourites to overturn Labour's near-15,000 majority. Labour officials in the constituency on Thursday said the contest appeared too tight to predict.



The Dunham Hill and Hapsford village hall polling station in the Runcorn and Helsby constituency; a Reform win here would set off new jitters in Downing Street. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

Other overnight results will include the mayoralties in Greater Lincolnshire, where Reform is hopeful of taking the newly created post, and Doncaster, which is Labour-held and where the party believes it can win again.

However, the bulk of the council votes will not be counted before Friday morning, with many results not finalised until well into the afternoon.

Results are seen as particularly hard to predict given the atomised polling figures, with Reform, Labour and the Conservatives each recording national support generally between 20% and 25%, and the Lib Dems and Greens not notably far behind.

One thing that does seem certain is that the Conservatives will lose many hundreds of council seats, in part because they did so well in 2021 when the same seats were last contested, amid the brief fillip of Boris Johnson's "vaccine bounce".

A particularly bad night could put new pressure on Badenoch's leadership of the party, but Conservative MPs say there is minimal chance of any formal challenge to her for now, not least because so many voters expressed distaste at the Tories' internal divisions in the run-up to last year's general election.

Starmer can most likely gloss over a modest night in council results, but a Reform win in Runcorn, and in a couple or several of the mayoral races, would set off new jitters in Downing Street.

The Lib Dems and Greens will be hopeful of making gains, but also wary about potential ingress by Reform.

14. Labour ads use NHS to attack Farage's views before major Reform rally

Labour has begun an all-out assault on Nigel Farage over his views on the NHS in the run-up to key elections in May, as the Reform UK leader prepared to host what is billed as his party's biggest ever rally in Birmingham.

In a coordinated campaign before Farage spoke at a 10,000-person event in the city on Friday evening, Labour paid for nearly a dozen billboard posters around the city with messages about his talk about replacing the NHS with an insurance-based healthcare system.

That morning, the city's Birmingham Mail newspaper was covered in a paid-for wraparound Labour advertisement carrying a quote from Farage on the same subject.

Both the lavish Reform event and the Labour response are a sign of the increased stakes as the two parties prepare to battle it out in local elections on 1 May, as well as the Runcorn and Helsby byelection, the latter prompted by the resignation of Labour MP Mike Amesbury and expected on the same day.

"We're now very much in campaign mode after the spring statement," a Labour source said. "Farage is a gifted political orator but soundbites will only carry you so far. It's time for some scrutiny over what he believes and would do. Expect more of this."

The chosen territory for now is the NHS, with Labour seeking to draw attention to Farage's previous hints that he would prefer a different model. Quizzed about this on Friday morning, Farage told the BBC that he supported it being free at point of use, but that he would like to "re-examine the whole funding model".

While Farage says his preferred idea would be more like the top-up system seen in parts of continental Europe, Labour argues that he would in fact oversee a US free-for-all.

Before the rally, the party pointed to Farage's links to a US thinktank called the Heartland Institute, which strongly argues for the American healthcare system and has criticised the NHS.

Speaking at a Heartland Institute dinner in Chicago in September last year, Farage praised its work and called for its ideas to spread to the UK. "Maybe the time has come for a bit of reverse colonialism, maybe it's time that Heartland came and set up in Britain and Europe and brought some of the wisdom that you've brought to the American debate," he told the audience.

Friday's rally at Birmingham's Utilita Arena was a chance for him to galvanise his supporters before a major election effort – and to try to move on from bitter rows of the past few weeks.

Rupert Lowe, elected as one of Reform's five MPs in July, is in open war with Farage after he lost the party whip over allegations linked to bullying staff and threats to Reform's chair, which Lowe has dismissed as a smear.

In his speech to the rally, Farage called for a "British form of Doge", modelled on Elon Musk's "department of government efficiency". He also called for a complete ban on civil servants working from home.

Farage, who has faced criticism for his complete control over the party, also told the crowd that he had given up his two-third share of its shares in favour of members. After the local elections, he said, members would be able to vote for a party board.

The event, which ran very late and appeared less full than the claimed 10,000 ticket sales, also saw Arron Banks, the former aide and donor to Farage in Ukip, as the Reform candidate for the west of England mayoralty.

In Runcorn, although Amesbury had a near-15,000 majority, Reform have been heavily tipped to take the seat after the MP was convicted of punching a man in the street and stepped down, and a Labour win would be a reverse for Farage.

Similarly, winning the near-25% of the vote they have polled at recently would give Reform 400-plus council seats on 1 May but recent council byelections – however limited a guide – have not gone hugely well for the party.

At a council byelection in Maldon in Essex on Thursday Reform took just 16.7% of the vote, and the Conservatives held the seat. Of four recent byelections in the county, billed as a Reform stronghold, the party won a lower vote share than Ukip did in 2013-14.

15. Nigel Farage names 29 councillors joining Reform as he tries to move on from rifts

Nigel Farage has presented 29 councillors who have joined Reform UK as he tries to move his party on from a damaging rift surrounding the suspension of one of its MPs, Rupert Lowe.

However, the Reform UK leader also hit out at what he described as “online abuse” and “outright racism” directed recently at Reform’s chair, Zia Yusuf, as divisions within the party over Lowe’s suspension boiled over.

The new Reform councillors were introduced at an event where Farage said his party needed “old lags” – including 15 councillors leaving the Tories, one who left Liberal Democrats and a range of independents. They included a Cheshire councillor who had previously quit Labour in a row over transgender policy.

Farage said in a speech that the fallout with Lowe had caused “some consternation” but insisted “that upset is very much at the edges” as he suggested a report by a barrister into allegations about the MP could be completed this week.

“You might have noticed that we have been through a little bit of turbulence over the course of the last couple of weeks,” said Farage, who grew short-tempered when it came to questions from the press about Lowe.

“We’ve been increasingly concerned about the behaviour of one of our members of parliament, and when we found out that some serious complaints have gone in, we thought, you know what, let’s just suspend the whip and let’s find out what the truth is, and we will wait ... we will get the report from the independent king’s counsel.”

When asked about the comments directed at Yusuf, who has become a lightning rod for criticism from disaffected current and former Reform members, Farage said that there was “a world of difference” between what the party chair had been subjected to and comments another Reform MP, Lee Anderson, had made about the London mayor, Sadiq Khan.

Anderson joined Reform UK in 2024 after he was stripped of the Conservative whip over comments he made about Khan, which were condemned as Islamophobic.

The Guardian has seen comments on Facebook groups run for and by Reform UK members where some criticism of Yusuf has made reference to the fact that he is a Muslim.

Asked if Reform UK members were responsible for the abuse of Yusuf, Farage said: “I don’t think that those comments online have necessarily come from Reform UK members. I think there’s a quite deliberate attempt out there to try and just be as nasty as people can. And I don’t like it.

“I have always said [parties he has led] they would be non-racist, non-sectarian parties. I’ve always been very tough on that, I’m going to go on being tough on that.”

Reform has been in turmoil for the past fortnight owing to a rift between Farage and Lowe, who was thrown out of the party in a battle over bullying allegations and referred to the police. Lowe had criticised Farage in a Daily Mail interview and has since claimed he was censored by the party on immigration issues.

Lowe, 67, has said there is “zero credible evidence” against him and suggested his suspension was linked to his criticism of the party leader.

Supporters of Lowe have been leaving the party. They include Maria Bowtell, a Yorkshire councillor who said on Sunday saying she would serve out her term as an independent.

16. House of Commons speaker has kept almost 300 gifts over past four years

Lindsay Hoyle, the speaker of the House of Commons, has kept almost 300 gifts over the last four years including dozens of bottles of alcohol, hampers, ties, cufflinks and chocolates, his declarations show.

The speaker received a large volume of presents from foreign dignitaries such as ambassadors, MPs and sometimes companies and chose to keep hundreds of them rather than donating them to Speaker's House – his residence and office – or parliament.

The list, voluntarily declared by the speaker, includes about 80 bottles of alcohol, such as wine, champagne, whisky, rum and other spirits, since 2021.

Other items retained by the speaker include 26 ties and cufflinks, skincare sets sent to him by Korean diplomats, books, drinking glasses, presents for his pets, a rug, pictures and decorative ornaments.

At Christmas last year, he received hampers from Bahrain and Qatar, plus one from Anguilla containing champagne and two bottles of wine as well as foodstuffs. Priti Patel, the Conservative MP and shadow foreign secretary, has sent him a Christmas pudding at least three years in a row.

On some occasions, the speaker passed on or shared free gifts with his office. When the North Macedonian ambassador gave him food and drink in November last year, he kept a bottle of Smidgin gin and a bottle of wine and gave four herbal teas and three pots of Ajvar (a red pepper sauce) to his office.

The register gives a glimpse of some of the free gifts offered to politicians, who are only required to declare those worth more than £300, while ministers must declare those worth more than £150.

Tom Brake, the director of the Unlock Democracy campaign group and a former deputy leader of the House of Commons, said: "The speaker's voluntary declaration of the gifts he receives shines a light on the potential scale of freebies accepted but undeclared by MPs.

"The very generous £300 declaration threshold for MPs needs to be brought in line with the rules that commonly apply in the public and the private sector, where only nominal gifts can be accepted."

Keir Starmer, the prime minister, previously declared thousands of pounds worth of free clothing and pairs of glasses donated to him by the Labour donor Lord Alli. After a public furore, he and other senior cabinet ministers have said they will not accept freebies while in government.

A spokesperson for the Speaker's Office said: "As is common practice across the world, the speaker gives and receives gifts when hosting dignitaries as a token of friendship and relationship-building between nations and parliaments. All items are declared proactively – regardless of the £300 threshold applied by the MPs' register of interests – to ensure transparency and to avoid conflicts of interest.

"In consultation with parliamentary officials, a decision is made as to whether a gift would make a meaningful addition to the Speaker's House historic collection, and if it should go on display. If the item does not meet those criteria, for example perishable goods, it is either retained personally by the speaker or his office.

"As part of his welcome to visiting dignitaries and to cement friendships, many of the gifted ties and cufflinks are worn by the speaker – and decorative heritage items relating to that country are put on display."

Hoyle has recently defended himself in relation to spending on overseas trips that amounts to about £250,000 since 2019 on 19 foreign trips.

The figure includes more than £180,000 on first- and business-class flights, while his stays included hotels in luxury resorts and dining in high-end restaurants.

In his first interview since the revelations, Hoyle told the Sunday Times last month that it was his duty to represent the House at home and abroad.

“People see the prime minister going off to the G20 and G7 but, of course, there’s the speaker’s equivalent of that in the same way that the secretaries of state also have their international conferences,” he said.

“Now, there’s two ways we could do it. Leave an empty chair without the UK attending. What does that say about the UK’s standing in the world — especially with global events at the moment? But also it’s about using my power and influence in that sense to speak out, because it is about speaking truth to power to the Chinese and to Russia.

“For example, when I go to these conferences, it’s about standing up and leading the rest of the room to tell Russia it had no right to invade the sovereign territory of Ukraine and [that it has] no right to continue that war.”

Hoyle is paid about £160,000 a year and has use of a grace and favour flat in Speaker’s House within the Palace of Westminster.

17. New wave of tactical voting to ‘stop Reform’ and hamper Farage in local elections

A new wave of tactical voting could hamper progress for Reform UK in Thursday’s local elections, campaigners believe, with even some Conservative voters now saying they will vote Labour or Liberal Democrat.

This could particularly affect the Runcorn and Helsby byelection, where Nigel Farage’s party is still the favourite to overturn a Labour majority of almost 15,000, in what would be a significant blow to Keir Starmer.

The same phenomenon has also been reported in the contest for the new mayoralty of Hull and East Yorkshire, with polls showing the Reform candidate as leading, but where the Liberal Democrats are trying to position themselves as the main challengers.

Falling short in either race would be a blow for Farage, particularly as results in the byelection and some of the six mayoral contests will be declared overnight on Thursday – before those for 24 councils across England also being contested – setting the tone for media coverage.

Voters have become increasingly sophisticated at voting tactically, with the 2024 general election seeing many instances of Labour, Lib Dem or Green voters switching to whichever of the parties was seen as best placed to beat the Conservatives locally.

But according to Labour and Lib Dem officials, the rise of Reform, which is now regularly topping national opinion polls, appears to be boosting this phenomenon, with some voters also seemingly motivated by talk of a future Reform-Conservative alliance.

With the byelection in Runcorn a direct Reform-Labour contest, campaigners say they have not only had Lib Dem and Green supporters promise to back Labour to thwart Reform, but also Conservatives saying the same.

The bulk of Tory support is located in the more prosperous areas of Frodsham and Helsby, close to Chester, with Labour using the final days of the campaign to heavily target centrist Conservatives who dislike Farage.

“A big part of our operation has been to try to squeeze the Tory vote there,” a Labour source said. “It is happening, but to what extent remains to be seen.”

Talk of a future alliance between the Conservatives and Reform has helped push the message, they said. “Lots of the more traditional Tories don’t like the way their party has been dragged to the right. In Runcorn, some people like Farage, but they are tribally anti-Conservative. For both groups these sort of links can be a red line,” they added.

While polling for the Hull and East Yorkshire mayoralty has been less clear, the Lib Dems have used their second place in recent polling to campaign heavily on the idea only they can stop Reform, with a mass of leaflets and digital adverts trying to persuade Labour and Green supporters to vote tactically.

“We’re focusing really hard on an almost postcode-by-postcode campaign in places where we think there is a stop Reform vote,” a Lib Dem official said. “For a lot of voters, Reform are so far off the deep end that it motivates people. They’re less interested in policies, it’s more: ‘Our number one priority is to stop Reform, if you can do that we’ll vote for you.’”

This message, they said, also seemed to be resonating with some Conservative supporters in areas such as East Riding, where the party is traditionally strong.

“In Hull, there are lots of Labour and Green voters who are terrified of Reform. In East Riding, what you might call the softer Conservatives are also increasingly saying: ‘My goodness, I can’t let Reform win.’”

“Something has happened in the last 10 days. It feels like a lot of voters are pivoting quite hard into what you could call a ‘stop Reform coalition’.”

Farage has sought to manage expectations before the polls open on Thursday, saying his party lacks the experience and expertise of Labour in on-the-ground campaigning, which he says will particularly restrict their chances in Runcorn.

However, campaigners from other parties say that, in the byelection particularly, Reform have mustered teams of campaigners to knock on doors, augmented by a heavy spend on paid-for mailed leaflets and social media advertising.

The results in Runcorn and the mayoral elections, and more generally in the council votes, will be closely examined for signs of how well the Reform election machine is working, as well as for the emergence of any informal anti-Reform coalition.

While a combined Reform and Conservative polling share would be above 45%, strategists from other parties say any pact between the two would be very likely to make such tactical voting even more prevalent.

18. No 10 bullish about immigration, despite Labour MPs’ concerns about rightward shift

Labour is under no illusions about how difficult Thursday’s local elections will be for the government. Nigel Farage’s Reform is on course to take hundreds of council seats and is ahead in the race for two mayoralties. Keir Starmer has not even campaigned in the Runcorn and Helsby byelection, such is the expectation of defeat.

“The opening image of this set of elections was a Labour MP punching a swing voter in the face,” one party insider admitted. “Of course it’s going to be tough.”

While much of the focus will inevitably be on how the Conservatives fare against Reform – with Kemi Badenoch’s team prepared for a brutal night – there is much anxiety in the Labour ranks about how to handle the threat from Farage.

Some Labour MPs worry that No 10’s total focus on maintaining support among voters tempted by Reform means their party is in danger of lurching too far to the right on issues like immigration.

They fear this could turn off more progressive voters who see legal migration as essential to economic growth and cultural enrichment, and recognise that much irregular migration comes from a place of desperation.

A YouGov poll last week suggested that while 8% of those who voted Labour last year would now vote Reform, double that had shifted to the Lib Dems or Greens.

But No 10 insiders are bullish, arguing that the day after the general election, Starmer said immigration would be one of his three priorities – along with the cost of living and the NHS – and that all their internal research shows that voters want the PM to get a grip on the issue.

“We’re not putting an undue focus on migration,” one source said. “Voters from across the spectrum are worried about it. There’s a very visible breach of our border security, and that’s before you get to asylum costs and community cohesion.

“We need to build public confidence in the government’s ability to control our borders. It is only by doing that that we get the space to talk about issues like youth visas or how we can respond to migration that arises from conflicts.”

But government officials do acknowledge that many voters conflate legal and irregular migration, which is why the Office for National Statistics’ upgrade of the Tories’ net migration figures to almost 1 million last year was so damaging to public trust.

“People are worried about both,” one official said. “Because small boats are such a visual and vivid phenomenon they end up being conflated with legal migration. On the doorstep, people don’t make a distinction between graduate visas and small boats.”

Small boat crossings remain a huge political problem for Labour and the Tories – a wound that Farage continues to punch. The number of people who have crossed the English Channel in small boats this year has exceeded 10,000, it emerged on Monday, an increase of about 40% compared with the same period last year.

Government officials claim there are early signs that the UK’s attempts to tackle the issue are having an impact. Along with European allies, they say they have begun disrupting supply chains to make it harder for people-smugglers to get hold of boats in the first place.

Improved relations between Paris and London have also led to the French reinstating a dedicated policing unit, the *Compagnie de Marche*, from this Thursday, to help tackle the gangs. French police are also expected to have legal backing to intercept boats in shallow waters within weeks.

There is also more work being done to shut down the hidden-market economy in the UK, which European allies argue is a major pull factor for economic migrants. There has been a 40% increase in illegal-working raids since the election.

The government has also said it will soon publish a white paper on how it is bringing down legal migration levels, with Home Office insiders insisting the plans have been under way since November, rather than being a kneejerk reaction to the rise of Reform.

“Our MPs are just going to have to deal with it,” said one government insider. “We promised we’d get to grips with immigration and we’re going to do our damndest to do that. It’s not about countering Farage, it’s about delivering on our election promises.”

19. Employment rights bill ‘improves Labour’s favourability among voters’

Labour’s employment rights bill could substantially increase the party’s plunging popularity with Reform and former Conservative voters, but few are aware of the changes, new data by a pollster has suggested.

Among the most popular policies is on workers’ prevention from harassment, which has an extremely high favourability rating – despite significant criticism from Nigel Farage, Reform UK politicians and the Conservatives, who have sought to portray it as a “banter ban”.

The polling suggests the government’s low favourability could increase by up to 13 points – and by even more among Tory-to-Labour switchers and former Labour voters now likely to vote Reform.

The poll of 5,000 adults, commissioned by the TUC union, found only about a quarter of voters were aware of the reforms such as banning zero-hours contracts, ending fire-and-rehire, and introducing “day one” protections from unfair dismissal. Prevention of harassment – which makes that a legal duty for employers – is the second most popular policy after the ban on fire-and-rehire.



Paul Nowak, the general secretary of the TUC, which commissioned the polling, said the employment rights bill is a ‘vote winner’. Photograph: Sean Smith/The Guardian

The reforms in the bill – which will come to the House of Lords on Tuesday – are also popular with Labour voters who have moved towards the Green party or independent MPs, increasing favourability by 11 points.

Peter McLeod, who ran polling for Labour in opposition, conducted the polling with his firm Hold Sway. He said: “There’s a huge number of voters out there that still know little to nothing about this legislation. The good news for the government is that as people learn about the employment rights bill, their views toward the government get more positive.”

Those polled were shown arguments in favour of the bill – including that protections were tipping the balance back towards workers – but also arguments against the changes, such as treating business as a “cash cow” and Farage’s argument that it would “ban banter”.

“It’s important to note that this was a balanced exercise,” McLeod said. “To simulate the actual debate around the bill, we showed tough arguments against it as well as the changes that it will bring in and the arguments in favour. After that robust debate, favourability to the government goes up.

“When we isolate the views of those crucial swing voters who picked the Tories in 2019 and Labour in 2024, we find a similar positive shift in the government’s reputation. This goes for 2024 Labour voters who would now vote Reform and Green as well.”

The bill has been the subject of intensive lobbying from business groups and criticism in the national media, and linked to low growth forecasts. Critics have suggested the increased protection for workers is an additional burden for businesses who have also seen national insurance for employees increase.

There has been a perceived reluctance from ministers, including the chancellor, Rachel Reeves, to robustly defend or promote the bill given the need to preserve relations with business, though fears that the bill would be watered down at its final reading in the Commons did not come about.

The TUC has done its own extensive promotion of the bill, including in Farage’s Clacton seat. The TUC general secretary, Paul Nowak, said: “The employment rights bill is a vote winner, and demonstrably improves the government’s standing with working people.

“Commonsense policies like banning zero-hours contracts, ending fire-and-rehire and protecting workers from harassment are all hugely popular with voters across the political spectrum, from Green to Reform. The likes of Reform are defying their supporters by voting against improvements to workers’ rights at every stage.

“Boosting awareness of the employment rights bill will help expose Nigel Farage as a phoney who is on the side of bad bosses – not working people.”

20. Starmer faces Labour revolt over plan to raid bank accounts of benefit claimants

Keir Starmer is facing a rebellion over his plan to use direct deductions from people's bank accounts and the cancellation of driving licences as part of a government crackdown on welfare fraud and over-claiming.

In an attempt to claw back the annual £9.7bn in benefit overpayments made by the Department for Work and Pensions due to fraud or error, the government has adopted Conservative plans for debt recovery.

A fraud, error and recovery bill would give the DWP the power to require banks to provide data to help identify when an applicant is not meeting the eligibility criteria for a benefit for which they have applied.

The bill would allow the government to demand bank statements to identify debtors who have sufficient funds to repay what they owe through fraud or error in a claim. The DWP would then have the power to recover money directly from bank accounts of those not on benefits or in PAYE employment who are identified as having the means to pay.

Those who repeatedly fail to repay funds could fall prey to a suspended DWP disqualification order that would disqualify them from holding a driving licence.

Liz Kendall, the secretary of state for work and pensions, has said the powers are necessary to deal with a "broken welfare system" but she is facing opposition from her own backbenches.

Amendments tabled by the Labour MP for Poole, Neil Duncan-Jordan, that would force the government to drop key strands of the bill are supported by a growing number of MPs in Starmer's party.

The amendments, backed by 17 named Labour MPs, would ensure that only those suspected of fraud rather than being the victim of an error were subjected to surveillance, "allowing the government to target criminality without monitoring the public", Duncan-Jordan said.

The Labour MP is also proposing to remove the power to apply to a court to strip people of their driving licences due to debt, describing the policy as a "poverty penalty".

Writing in the Guardian, Duncan-Jordan, who was elected for the first time in 2024, accused Starmer's government of "resurrecting Tory proposals for mass spying on people who receive state support".

He writes that the legislation "would compel banks to carry out financial surveillance of welfare recipients", adding that "given the volume of accounts involved, this will be completed by an algorithm".

"If the software flags a possible overpayment, whether due to fraud or error, the bank will report the individual to the Department for Work and Pensions for further investigation," Duncan-Jordan writes. "By default, welfare recipients would be treated as suspects, simply because they need support from the state."

He adds that the government should learn from the Post Office scandal in which a faulty computer system led to hundreds of people being falsely accused of fraud and error.

He writes: "The risk of a Horizon-style scandal on a massive scale is glaringly obvious when millions are being monitored. It will be disabled people, carers, pensioners and the very poorest people who are impacted by wrongful investigations and forced to endure burdensome appeals to prove their innocence."

Kendall has said the use of "direct deduction orders" allowing the recovery of funds from claimants could save the taxpayer £500m a year once fully rolled out.

In the 2023-24 financial year, the DWP estimates that benefit overpayments due to fraud or error by claimants totalled £9.7bn.

But the banking industry has raised concerns that it will be forced to hand over account information of claimants in cases where there are indications they may have been paid benefits incorrectly.

The legislation is seen to potentially clash with the obligations of banks under a Financial Conduct Authority consumer duty to protect customers who are vulnerable due to their financial situation.

Last week, the Guardian revealed that the regulatory policy committee, a government watchdog, had raised concerns that ministers had understated the impact on the poorest of its plans to directly deduct benefit overpayments from people's bank accounts.

A DWP spokesperson said: "We have an obligation to protect public funds, and it is right that we modernise our approach to catching fraudsters and overpayments. All the powers in the bill are underpinned by a principle of fairness and proportionality and do not involve mass surveillance of people's bank accounts.

"This includes utilising limited data from banks to help verify entitlement to benefits, helping us detect errors earlier and minimise debts accruing for claimants."

21. Thousands of civil servants to be moved out of London under fresh reform plan

Whitehall departments will be required to set out plans to move thousands of staff out of London as part of their bids to secure funding from the Treasury at the spending review.

The proposal to relocate civil service jobs to a dozen towns and cities across the UK is aimed at bringing the development of government policy closer to the communities it affects.



Around one in five – or 100,000 – civil servants are based in London, with about 70,000 working in the north-west of England. There are 513,000 full-time civil servants in central government, up sharply from a recent low of about 380,000 in 2016.

The government claims the relocation plans could bring more than £700m of economic benefit to towns and cities including Leeds, Glasgow, Cardiff and Bristol by 2030.

The 'Places for Growth' plan to move 22,000 officials outside the capital was first announced by Rishi Sunak as chancellor in 2020 as part of the Conservatives' levelling up agenda.

However, Labour has now picked up the scheme as part of its attempts to reform the state, which also include plans to cut more than 10,000 jobs, amid concerns the civil service had become too big and unwieldy after expanding with the demands of Brexit and the Covid pandemic.

In an attempt to inject some urgency into the process, the Cabinet Office minister, Pat McFadden, will write to all Whitehall departments to tell them their funding allocation in June will be contingent on submitting their plans.

Alongside the spending review, the first ever strategic workforce plan for the civil service will be published, looking at the size and shape of Whitehall and whether it is fit for modern government.

“We’re keen to go further to enhance the impact of government in places across the country, so that the civil service has an active presence in communities across the UK and contributes to local growth and job creation,” a government source said.

“The plans will see more roles working closer to frontline services, facilitating greater understanding of the real issues facing local services and people, and how central government policy can support them. Central government can’t solve the issues facing local communities from Whitehall alone.”

Civil servants working in regional offices outside London will continue to be expected to spend at least three days a week in the office.

The government is introducing greater use of performance-related pay for senior staff and improved performance management across the civil service, with fast-track exits for poor performers.

22. MPs should not do media work that ‘monetises’ their role, says government



The government has backed proposals to stop MPs taking second jobs they have been offered because of their role in parliament, and expressed concern that some paid media roles allow them to “monetise” their privileged positions.

It set out its detailed thinking on how the rules could be tightened on MPs’ outside interests in evidence to the House of Commons standards committee.

The policy statement said it supported asking MPs to sign up to certain principles, as suggested by the parliamentary standards commissioner, Daniel Greenberg.

In particular it favours a draft principle saying: “Members are expected not to accept offers of paid outside interests that are made, or that a reasonable observer might think are being made, primarily because of their membership of the house.”

The government also said it had concerns about some instances in which MPs were paid by the media. Its submission said: “We are concerned with specific cases in which members might hold paid contracts of employment with media organisations that give rise to conflicts of interest and attention, both in the sense that the house is responsible for the laws governing our media and that such members would be monetising their offices for private gain. Such a practice can harm the reputation of the house, further eroding public confidence in our institutions.”

Analysis by the Guardian recently found six MPs had spent on average one working day a week on second jobs since the start of the 2024 parliament, with the Reform MPs Nigel Farage and Lee Anderson taking on lucrative jobs as presenters for GB News, as well as other work.

The government’s official backing for Greenberg’s suggested principles comes after Lucy Powell, the leader of the House of Commons, asked the standards committee to look at MPs’ outside interests and gave evidence suggesting she would support such a system.

Labour’s position on outside interests has significantly changed since Keir Starmer said in 2021 that he wanted to “ban all second jobs for MPs, with very limited exceptions”. In its manifesto, Labour said it wanted to “take forward urgent work on the restrictions that need to be put in place to prevent MPs from taking up roles that stop them serving their constituents and the country”, including closing loopholes on lobbying.

At one point, Boris Johnson’s Conservative government considered time limits on outside interests, but this was later dropped.

In its submission, the government said it did not support setting limits on types of jobs or hours or creating a list of banned professions. It said: “Whilst these approaches may be easily understood and enforced, they could create unfairness in the system, and any list could never cover all eventualities. As such, the government does not believe this is the right approach to deal with the nuances of this matter.”

The Committee on Standards in Public Life, an advisory body on ethics, told the committee that it backed the idea of “reasonable limits”, with indicative limits on earnings and time, such as not taking on work that was the equivalent of more than one day a week.

In other evidence, a string of Conservative MPs made arguments in favour of allowing outside interests. The shadow Treasury minister Richard Fuller made the case that it was “flawed” to suggest being a constituency MP was a full-time job.

He wrote: “Around 100 MPs simultaneously serve as ministers, taking on full-time roles while maintaining their constituency responsibilities. Furthermore, much constituency work is effectively handled by staff.”

Kevin Hollinrake, the shadow housing and communities secretary, who is a shareholder in a lettings and estate agency firm, wrote to the committee: “It is unrealistic to expect business owners to divest themselves of their interests before even considering entering parliament. A prohibition on outside interests would prove a significant deterrent from other business people entering the world of politics.”

However, some of those who provided evidence to the committee suggested the “principles-based” system backed by the government might not go far enough.

Transparency International UK said: “Allowing MPs to take up second jobs outside the boundaries of simply maintaining their professional qualifications leaves them open to corruption risks such as favouritism and quid pro quo arrangements. As it stands, jobs such as consultancy roles or non-executive director roles are still permitted.”

Prof David Hine, a tutor in politics at the University of Oxford, flagged concerns that a principle-based system could create “scope for ambiguity and misunderstanding which could discredit any proposals intended to tighten restrictions”.

23. Sue Gray warns No 10 to be careful about cuts to civil service

Keir Starmer’s former chief of staff Sue Gray has told No 10 to be “careful” about civil service cuts and derogatory language about the work of Whitehall.

Making her maiden speech in the House of Lords, Gray made the case that civil servants were integral to realising the government’s objectives and would be listening to language that referred to them as “blobs” and “pen-pushers”, and to talk of cuts with “axes” and “chainsaws”.

Experts have said civil service transformation is very likely to cost more than it saves for some years. The government is targeting a 15% cut in “admin” costs of the civil service by 2030, saving £2.2bn and leading to about 10,000 job losses.



At the same time, a £350m fund has been launched to cover the costs of redundancies and a £3.25bn “transformation fund” is available to help with the costs of public service reform, particularly with the use of artificial intelligence and new computing systems.

One Whitehall source said the amount of money intended to be saved each year “hasn’t really been worked out yet” and the expectation is that “big savings won’t kick in” until the end of the forecast period of 2028-29.

Another senior Whitehall figure said spending billions on technology to create productivity savings in the civil service was a “huge gamble” as it was far from clear that savings would be made quickly – pointing to IT changes that often ran over their allocated time and budget in government.

Spending in Whitehall is due to rise over the next five years by an average of 1.2%, but much of this increase will go to the NHS and defence, while unprotected departments could see cuts of about 0.8% each year from 2026.

Alex Thomas, a programme director at the Institute for Government, said: “If you want to make the state more effective, sometimes that does take a little bit of money and that can release more savings.

On the civil service side, the win is not loads of extra money. You can save a bit – £1.5-2bn over the spending review period – but the real win is making the civil service more effective.

“With the money for civil service redundancies, it’s worth paying to get rid of some people you think aren’t the most effective people. The private sector wouldn’t think twice about it ... but I don’t think that, in the short term, will release loads of money and the transformation fund is likely to cost a bit.”

He added: “It’s about productivity, better decision making, better advice, better organisation of public services. You need good people to do that, and deconflicting or delayering some of the growth of the centre, where you’ve got lots of people and too many chiefs. You can have fewer people and clearer direction.”

Gray made her intervention in the House of Lords after leaving Starmer’s government in the autumn as part of a shake-up in which she was replaced by the Labour campaign expert Morgan McSweeney. She was given a peerage by Starmer in January and her first speech in the House of Lords focused on her career as a civil servant and the future of the civil service.

In what appeared to be a joke about her short tenure in No 10 with Starmer, she told the Lords: “I am not sure what it is about the mention of my time in Downing Street that brings me to the issue of job security and employment.”

She said: “I want to return to my first set of jobs in what was the Department for Social Security, working in employment support, as it is highly relevant to today’s debate and to the future of our civil service. Back then, I worked with truly heroic and committed people, striving every day, in very difficult circumstances, to help people in even more challenging situations.

“They were the civil service at its best: on the frontline, as far away from Whitehall’s machinations as it is possible to be. Today, I see the same sort of brilliance. What these and other civil servants are doing is central to the government’s – and the nation’s – mission to bring growth back into our economy and security to our society. That is why I would caution all of us to be careful, not only about our decisions but our language also. When we hear phrases with ‘blobs’, ‘pen-pushers’, ‘axes’, ‘chainsaws’ and other implements, they hear it too.

“Difficult decisions are needed, of course, and the civil service will be keen to be part of any reform journey, but we need them and other public servants to succeed. I will continue to support a progressive civil service. I hope others will do the same.”

24. ‘Polygamous working’ civil servant held multiple jobs, UK investigation finds

A civil servant held multiple full-time jobs at different government departments at the same time, according to a Cabinet Office investigation.

A report by the National Fraud Initiative (NFI) – a data-matching exercise carried out every two years by the Cabinet Office that helps prevent and detect fraud – made the discovery in 2022-23 when looking at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

According to an NFI report published on Wednesday, the exercise identified a Defra employee who had been paid by both Defra and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) for full-time roles.

“Following an investigation, it was found out that this person held three roles in three government departments during two separate timeframes,” the report said. “This individual also held two different vetting clearances concurrently with different departments, unbeknown to the vetting team or departments.”

The report revealed the employee had withheld his civil service employment history when applying for additional roles.

After the investigation was concluded, the person was dismissed from Defra and two other civil service employers with immediate effect, while he had already resigned from DHSC.

The report said “polygamous working” had become an “emerging risk area” due to changes to working practices since the Covid-19 pandemic – namely, staff working remotely or on a hybrid basis. A spokesperson from Defra quoted in the NFI report said: “We concluded that by taking part in the NFI, Defra was able to find and stop this simultaneous employment.”

A government spokesperson said: “While we cannot comment on specific cases, this government has stepped up its efforts to fight public sector fraud.



“We constantly look to improve detection processes and recently implemented new centralised checks to prevent this type of fraud. Moreover, we have expanded the use of data analytics within the National Fraud Initiative, which helped to identify £510m in fraud and errors across the public sector between 2022 and 2024.”

The case was referred to the Crown Prosecution Service. The defendant was subsequently charged and the case referred to the crown court.

25. Labour promises ‘radical’ shake-up of UK civil service

Pat McFadden has vowed to bring about “radical” civil service changes including digitisation and stricter performance targets for officials to mirror private sector practices.

Under the plans expected to be announced this week, under-performing officials could be incentivised to leave their jobs and senior officials will have their pay linked to performance.

A new target will aim to have one in 10 civil servants working in a digital or data role within five years, bringing Whitehall into line with private sector benchmarks.

There are currently 25,000 digital and data civil servants, making up 5% of the civil service workforce. The Cabinet Office said it would be guided by the principle that no time should be spent on a task where digital alternatives or AI could do it better, quicker and to the same quality.

“It just cannot be right that in some parts of the state we’re still dealing with photocopiers or paper forms, when there are quicker, cheaper and better fixes,” McFadden said in a statement.

The plans form part of a wider efficiency drive, with ministers planning to cut about 10,000 civil service roles, although McFadden declined to publicly to commit to a specific figure on Sunday.

Alongside the exit processes, senior civil servants who were not meeting standards would be put on development plans, he said, with a view to firing them if there was no improvement within six months.

McFadden told the BBC One's Sunday with Laura Kuennsberg that the government "will be radical about this". "We believe in good public provision, that's why we fought the election ... It is part of what we believe in that the state can provide both security and opportunity for people," he said.

"That will guide us in our actions, it's upfront in our policies, so we will be radical about this, but it's about getting bang for our buck in terms of the outcomes for the public, it isn't an ideological approach to stripping back the state."

The government's efficiency drive has alarmed unions, which have criticised ministers for suggesting civil servants are happy with substandard results.



Paul Nowak, the TUC general secretary, told Times Radio he was "disappointed" in McFadden's plans and described them as "a set of proposals that look more about grabbing headlines rather than about a serious plan for reforming our public services".

The civil servants' trade union, the FDA, described the announcement as a "retreading of failed narratives", while Prospect has said that civil servants have been "integral to helping the UK navigate the challenges we have faced in recent times".

Labour and the Conservatives have clashed over their proposals for overhauling Whitehall. McFadden said on Sunday that the size of the civil service had ballooned under the Tories – though this was justified partly by Brexit and Covid-19 – and that Boris Johnson had failed to cut numbers despite setting a target.

Chris Philp, the shadow home secretary, admitted his party had let the civil service become "too big" but said Labour's plans were "weak and anaemic" compared with what the Tories had been planning before they lost the election.

26. Civil servants will need to work efficiently or face redundancy under new rules

Senior civil servants must find cuts in their Whitehall budgets or risk losing their jobs under new rules, ministers will announce on Thursday.

Pat McFadden, the Cabinet Office minister, will unveil a set of performance standards intended to ensure value for money in Whitehall.



Under the new policy, senior civil servants will have to demonstrate they have made budget cuts, met collective performance standards and managed their staff effectively. The Cabinet Office will introduce government-wide checks at the end of each year.

The measures are intended to reward good performance in Whitehall and identify areas for improvement. Those who fail will be put on a performance development plan and potentially face being made redundant.

Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, has ordered government departments to make 5% efficiency cuts to their budgets as part of the spending review process, which determines how much money different parts of government get over the coming years.

There are concerns Reeves will have to either raise taxes again or cut spending when the Office of Budgetary Responsibility delivers its verdict on the state of the economy next month.

“Taxpayer money is at the heart of all decisions made in government, and the public must be confident we are spending every pound of their money well,” McFadden said. “It is vital that senior leaders are not just encouraged, but held responsible for this.”

“We need them to build productive and high-performing teams, to deliver on our plan to put more money in people’s pockets, get the NHS back on its feet and rebuild Britain.

“We will introduce new checks to identify and tackle poor performance where we find it, and to recognise the good work of senior leaders across the civil service.”

McFadden added that the Labour government needed “to reform the state to make it more agile and modern” and ultimately “make the civil service a world leader, equipped with the tools to tackle some of the biggest challenges we face today.”

The Guardian reported last year that ministers were planning to cut more than 10,000 civil service jobs under a new government efficiency drive. There is an acceptance internally that the civil service has become too big and unwieldy after expanding during Brexit and the Covid pandemic.

In a speech in December, McFadden said ministers wanted to rewire the state to function “more like a startup”. He announced plans to simplify Whitehall’s recruitment process for external candidates and to offer tech workers year-long secondments in Whitehall to tackle some of the public sector’s biggest challenges.

27. ‘We need to get back to British’: concern over immigration in Doncaster before local elections

“You can’t fix the system with the same hands that broke it,” Richie Vallance shouted through a megaphone from his mobility scooter. “Let’s make Doncaster Doncaster again,” he yelled at passersby in the city centre, who mostly politely ignored him.

Vallance is standing as an independent candidate for mayor in the local elections on 1 May, when all 55 seats on the city’s council will also be up for grabs. The small South Yorkshire city is a key battleground that will be a test of Labour’s resilience in the face of rising public support for Reform UK.

Nigel Farage’s party is surging ahead in the polls and in Doncaster there is a good chance it will wrestle control from Labour, which has been in power for nearly 50 years. Last month, a poll conducted by Electoral Calculus for the Telegraph found Reform was expected to win 32 of the council’s 55 seats.

“It’s a beautiful town, with so much potential,” said Vallance, who has some sympathies with Reform and previously explored standing for the party. “I was all about Brexit,” he said, “and we need to deal with the immigration problem in Doncaster.”

Immigration was on the minds of lots of people in the city centre on Wednesday, with some saying they felt it had had a negative impact on the city, particularly when it came to asylum seekers, of whom there are 688 housed in Doncaster, according to Home Office figures.

“I know they’ve got to be put somewhere but Doncaster has changed and it’s not for the better,” one man said.

This sentiment is exactly what Reform is hoping to harness, and why Farage paid a visit to the city at the start of April in support of Alexander Jones, the party’s mayoral candidate.

While there was also disgust among some Doncaster residents at the idea of voting for Reform, Labour was not popular either. Most people, in one way or another, pointed to what they felt was decline in the city, blaming the cash-strapped council.

It is something the current mayor, Labour’s Ros Jones, who has been in the directly elected post since 2013, is all too aware of, having battled under the weight of enormous budget cuts from central government.

She said: “I have made incredibly difficult decisions in terms of council services over the years of austerity, protecting frontline services and keeping council tax low, with Doncaster having the lowest council tax in Yorkshire.”

Though Jones had some supporters on the streets of Doncaster – one couple said they were “not unhappy” with the council and called Farage a liar and a “mini-Trump” – she is also contending with the council’s reputation.

Near the start of her tenure, she pulled the local authority out of special measures after the tabloids called Doncaster the “worst council in Britain”, and the label seems to have stuck.



Doncaster high street. Photograph: Alexandra Wallace/The Guardian

Labour could face a bigger brand-recognition problem in Doncaster as some of those out and about only vaguely recognised Keir Starmer's name. This might be cheering news for Reform except Farage's name did not necessarily ring bells either.

"Never heard of him," said Shelly, who was out in the Frenchgate shopping centre with her friends Siobhan and Jade.

"Was he in the Celebrity jungle?" Jade asked. "He seemed all right but I wouldn't know about his politics."

Though they did not know Reform, the trio did broadly agree with the party's policies on immigration.

"We need to get back to British, not everybody else," Siobhan said. "We shouldn't be fetching migrants when we can't even look after our own."

Shelly said: "I daren't say owt because it sounds racist."

They felt people coming to the UK were getting better treatment than those born here, particularly because they were put up in hotels and given homes without having to work.

The UK has a legal duty to house asylum seekers, and paid work is forbidden under asylum rules. The women said they were not against this, they just wanted to see British people better looked after.

"It's a bleak future for the next generation," Siobhan said.

The issue for all parties is likely to be getting voters to the polls. Most people the Guardian spoke to in Doncaster on Wednesday lunchtime said they did not vote and had not known there was a local election happening at all.

"I don't do politics," one man said. "Whoever's the prime minister, good luck to them."



Naomi Nache and Michael Yip. Photograph: Alexandra Wallace/The Guardian

Naomi Nache, from Romania, and Michael Yip, from Scunthorpe, moved to Doncaster when they started working in an Amazon warehouse. They have plans to leave for a bigger city, citing a lack of things to do in Doncaster, particularly on the “artistic side”.

Safety was a big issue for Nache, who said she felt afraid to go out in the city on her own. “It can be a bit scary. It doesn’t feel safe. I wouldn’t come to the town centre by myself,” she said.

Vallance has campaigned on public safety and tackling antisocial behaviour, knowing something about the subject himself having received a criminal conviction in 2016 for dressing up as the “Donny Klown” in an effort to attract attention to societal problems.

“I scared a lot of people and I’m really sorry about what I did. I went about it the wrong way,” Vallance said. “I took the mask off many years ago. Now I want to show who the real clowns are.”

28. ‘It’s an existential moment’: Greens take on Reform in fight for fed-up voters

With its thatched cottages and patchwork fields, Wiltshire is a traditional true-blue Tory heartland; its county council is always dominated by Conservatives.

But this week, the Greens think they stand a good chance of winning their first seats on the council because people are so fed up with the main parties.

Zack Polanski, the party’s deputy leader, has been on a blitz of the rural areas of England trying to drum up support. A vegan who lives in Hackney, east London, one might not think the country’s farmers and rural communities would find much common ground with him.

“The fact is, inequality hurts you no matter who you are,” he said as he prepared for a gruelling day of campaigning.

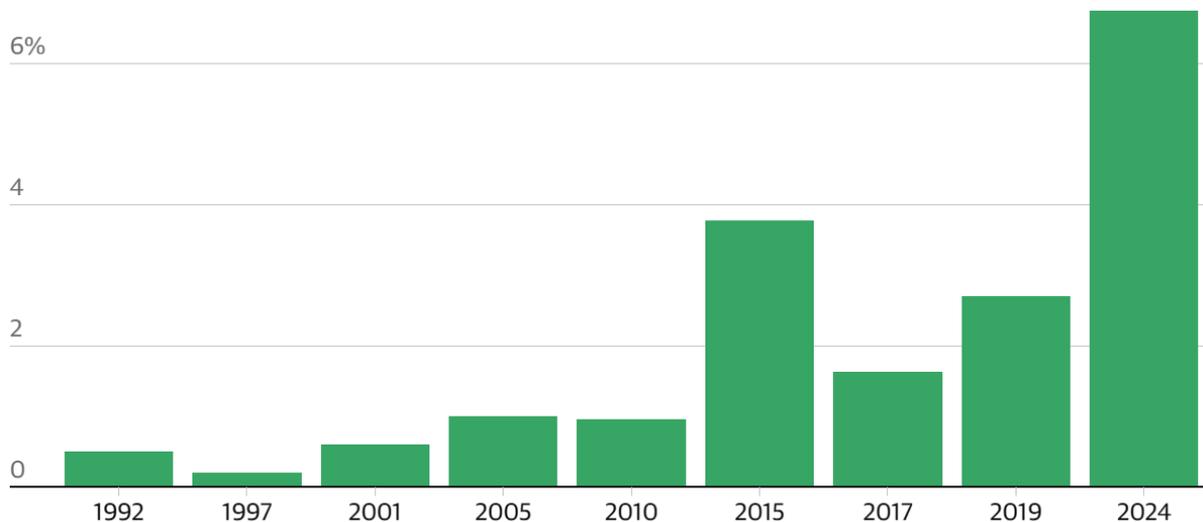
“Just yesterday I was meeting a farmer near Runcorn, while on the campaign trail for the byelection, and his land was contaminated by a chemical manufacturer in the 60s and 70s,” Polanski said. “It’s making it difficult for him to produce food. He’s really struggling to get anyone to do anything about it. There’s a misconception that farmers are wealthy, but many are struggling, and we have a climate crisis and a nature crisis, and ultimately, farming and the rural communities are going to be absolutely vital to that.”

He said he had been making the case for “green patriotism”, adding: “That’s about how do we make sure that our food is being as locally sourced as possible, that those farmers have those rights protected, and also they’re not being undercut by cheaper food standards around the world?”

Polanski said people were disillusioned with the mainstream parties and wanted change, which was giving the Greens and Reform UK a chance to cut through. The Green party has hugely increased its support in recent general elections, from 2.7% of the vote share in 2019 to 6.4% in 2024.

Green party vote share has increased significantly in recent years

Vote share in UK general elections, %



When the Guardian joined Polanski on a tour of Wiltshire, every single household visited said they would not be voting for the main parties – and many said they were choosing between Reform and the Green party.

Steve Traveller, a 68-year-old army veteran from Market Lavington, said this was the choice he was mulling. “I’ve always voted Conservative, but I didn’t vote for them last time. We needed a change. We were promised one by the current lot, but nothing has been done.” He said Labour’s decision to means test the winter fuel allowance particularly irritated him.

“The poor are still getting poorer and the rich are getting richer. I’ve nothing against Reform, I’ve nothing against the Greens, but I won’t be voting Conservative or Labour,” he said.

His neighbour Sarah, 57, echoed his views on the mainstream political parties: “I am sick of the lot of them.” She said she would vote for anyone who could stop housing development on the field at the end of her garden, as it would spoil her view.



Zack Polanski talks to Manu Teague-Sharpe (right), a local Green party member in Chippenham. Photograph: Sam Frost/The Guardian

Declan Baseley, 29, a former mayor of Chippenham, thinks he is in with a chance of getting elected to Wiltshire county council for the Greens this Thursday. “People want change,” he said. “Many tactically voted Liberal Democrat in the general election to get rid of the Conservatives, but people are so sick of the main parties that we do have a chance here.”

He said environmental issues often came up on the doorstep: “We have a sewage outflow near here into the River Avon, it’s unacceptable. Nature has declined all around our community. We actually reintroduced the great bustard into Wiltshire, it was locally extinct ... [and] we have beavers on the Avon. If elected, I would be pushing for funding to further restore nature around the area.” He has knocked on more than 1,300 doors in recent weeks and hopes his hard work will yield a seat.

Catherine Read, a retired radiographer, is also standing for a seat on the county council. “We came second last time in the Lavingtons, so I think we have a good chance,” she said, referring to the electoral area. Read had just been out laying new hedges to protect the barbastelle bat, which breeds in shrubbery: “We are so nature-depleted in Wiltshire and local people really care about that. If elected it would be one of my focuses to restore nature, there is so much opportunity to do it. We are surrounded by farmland which could be improved for nature if they had proper support.”

Brian Holmes, a 64-year-old horticulturist, lives near Chippenham and will be voting Green in the local elections. He said: “People are going to vote for change, and it remains to be seen whether they vote for the positive message the Green party is giving or if they will vote for Reform and its negative message. I am very worried about the climate denial from Reform and that we might end up with a similar situation they are having with Trump in America.”

Many farmers and other rural residents felt betrayed by politicians who campaigned for Brexit, and by the Labour government. For example, farmers have recently had their subsidies frozen, after they were promised they would be properly funded for protecting nature after the UK left the EU. They have also been undercut in trade deals with Australia and New Zealand, and a damaging deal with the US is still reportedly on the table.

“It’s the deepest irony of all that it is the communities which most vocally supported Brexit who are going to be most affected by the damaging effects of Brexit,” Polanski said. “I think that’s because the likes of Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson absolutely sold people a pup and told them that this was going to improve their lives, where it was very, very clear that this was going to be most damaging for their communities.”

It may look like the Greens have an opportunity, but their message has not cut through in the same way as Nigel Farage’s. The Reform leader has more than 1 million TikTok followers, far more than any Green, and is reaching a young audience. Polanski acknowledges this and said he recently met the leftwing influencer Gary Stevenson, who is followed by millions online, to discuss his social media strategy.

“Reform have cut through,” he said. “I don’t think that’s even arguable. I think they’re cutting through more than the government. They’re at the centre of all conversations at the moment.”

The Greens have to step up at this moment, Polanski said: “We need bold communication from the Green party as we’re at a point in politics where the one thing that is definitely certain is the status quo won’t hold up. So the question is, what is next? And the path we’re very easily on is this rise of fascism, of climate denial, the continued depletion of nature, for the pursuit of corporate capital. We need to show there is an alternative.”

He said he was alarmed by the level of anger and apathy towards politicians: “I think it’s an existential moment for the country, and I think the Green party has never been more important.”

29. Charities attack Farage claims of ‘mental illness problems’ overdiagnosis

Nigel Farage says the UK is “massively overdiagnosing those with mental illness problems” and creating a “class of victims”.

In comments, which have drawn criticism from campaigners and charities, the leader of Reform UK said it was too easy to get a mental health diagnosis from a GP.

“It’s a massive problem. I have to say, for my own money, when you get to 18 and you put somebody on a disability register, unemployed, with a high level of benefits, you’re telling people aged 18 that they’re victims,” he told a local elections press conference in Dover.

“And if you are told you’re a victim, and you think you’re a victim, you are likely to stay [a victim].” Farage said: “So many of these diagnoses, for SEND before 18, for disability register after 18 – so many of these have been conducted on Zoom, with the family GP.”



12:57

How children with special educational needs are being failed in England – video

The National Autistic Society said this was “incorrect, wrong, fake news”.

Assessments for conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism cannot be done by a GP. Meanwhile, statistics suggest that waiting times for mental health are significantly longer than for physical problems.

Analysis by the charity Rethink Mental Illness suggests that eight times as many people wait at least 18 months for mental health treatment compared with patients needing physical care.

Farage suggested that GPs might be under pressure to confirm a patient had depression or anxiety. “I think you’re the family GP, and I’ve known your family for generations, and you’re saying to me there’s a real problem here with depression, or whatever it may be, it’s quite hard for me as your GP to say ‘no’,” he said.

“I don’t think any of these allocations should be done by family GPs. I think it should be done independently.

“And I think we are massively – I’m not being heartless, I’m being frank – I think we are massively overdiagnosing those with mental illness problems and those with other general behavioural disabilities. And I think we’re creating a class of victims in Britain that will struggle ever to get out of it.”

Mel Merritt, the head of policy and campaigns at the National Autistic Society, said: “Nigel Farage’s comments are wildly inaccurate and show that he’s completely out of touch with what autistic children and adults have to go through to get a diagnosis or any support at all. For the record, absolutely no one has got an autism diagnosis through the GP – this is just incorrect, wrong, fake news.

“Children with SEND and disabled adults, including autistic people, are not victims who are being ‘overdiagnosed’. They are people who face huge delays and long fights to get the most basic support across every aspect of their lives, including diagnosis, education, health and social care.

“Spreading misinformation only perpetuates stigma and makes life harder. We’re calling on all politicians to drop the political point-scoring and stand up for their autistic and other disabled constituents.”

Brian Dow, the deputy chief executive of Rethink Mental Illness, said: “If Nigel Farage has a medical degree, he clearly hasn’t been keeping up with his continuous professional development.

“Rather than overdiagnosing young people, we’re abandoning a generation in crisis. Armchair analysis won’t fix a broken system. What we need from political leaders is commitment to finding serious solutions.”

Farage also said it was possible that any councils won by Reform in the local elections on 1 May could ban hotels from housing asylum seekers.

Robert Hayward, a pollster and Conservative peer, told ITV on Wednesday he believed the Conservatives would lose up to 525 seats and Farage would win up to 450.

Labour would be expected to stand still, gaining some from the Conservatives but losing some to Reform, the Greens and independents. The Lib Dems also hope to pick up seats from the Conservatives in areas where they won at the general election.

Conservatives are at a high-water mark at next week’s local elections because the elections were last held in 2021 when Boris Johnson was enjoying his “vaccine bounce”.

Asked whether he believed his party could win 450 seats, the Reform UK leader said that outcome would be “quite a political revolution”.

Key targets for Reform include the Runcorn and Helsby byelection, where the seat was held by Labour until the conviction of the former MP Mike Amesbury, and two regional mayoralities in Lincolnshire and in Hull and East Yorkshire. These would give the parties significant new platforms. Reform could also win Doncaster and Lincolnshire councils.

30. Nigel Farage defends allowing US chlorinated chicken into UK as part of trade deal

Nigel Farage has defended allowing labelled chlorinated chicken from the US into the UK as part of a trade deal, as a poll suggested his Reform UK party could be on course to take the highest number of seats at a general election.

Speaking before the local elections in England on 1 May, Farage said British consumers already ate chicken from places such as Thailand reared in poor conditions, and accepted chlorine-washed lettuce. He told the Sunday Times: “If you have a look at the chicken we are currently importing from Thailand, you look at the conditions they’ve been reared in, and that every single bag of pre-made salad in every single supermarket has been chlorinated ... once those basics have been accepted I’ll have a debate with you.”

Asked how he would prevent British chicken farmers being undercut by cheap producers from the US, he said: “I want to promote British farming as being a high-end product. I think the growth of farmers’ markets, they are a much more discerning audience that wants to know where their meat comes from. I don’t think British farmers have anything to fear from this long term.”

Both the government and the Conservatives have objected to US demands for its producers to be able to sell chicken with lower welfare standards in the UK. Britain does not allow imports of products such as chlorine-washed chicken and hormone-injected beef and Donald Trump has been pushing for agriculture to be part of a trade deal if the UK wants tariffs to be lowered on its exports such as cars and steel.

In the interview in Lancashire, where Reform is challenging both the Tories and Labour for council seats, Farage also spoke about his rift with Trump's adviser the US billionaire Elon Musk, who had been pushing for him to take a harder line on immigration and support the far-right figure Tommy Robinson.

He said he had been in contact with Musk since their spat on X, but added: "I've fought against this for 25 years. You can't bully me, I know what I think is right and what I think is wrong. Nobody pushes me around – not even him."

Reform is hoping to take hundreds of seats off the established parties at the local elections, with a three-way split in the polls between Farage's party, Labour and the Tories.

Keir Starmer's Labour is narrowly ahead in most surveys. However, an MRP poll by More in Common found this weekend that Reform could win more seats than the other parties at a general election even if it has a slightly lower vote share.

The poll looking at constituency-level splits surveyed 16,000 people, with its model suggesting 180 seats for the Reform party on 23.7% of the vote, 165 for the Tories on 24.3% of the vote and 165 for Labour on 24.5%. It indicated 67 seats for the Lib Dems on 13.3% of the vote and 35 for the SNP on 2.2%.

Its modelling suggested that if a general election were held now then Labour could lose 246 seats, including 10 cabinet ministers, with losses to Reform in the "red wall" and Welsh valleys, and to the SNP in Scotland.

The poll also indicated Labour was being squeezed from both sides, with progressive voters looking to the Lib Dems, Greens and independents causing seats to be lost to the right.

The polling suggests the main parties could be on course for difficult local elections on 1 May, although they are hard to forecast on account of the often low turnout.

Appendix 3. *The Times* Sub-Corpus

1. Reform denies Arron Banks offered defection 'bribe' to Tory MP

Nigel Farage's Reform UK has denied a mayoral candidate offered a "bribe" to a Conservative MP to defect.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns, a former Tory MP who has since switched to Reform, claimed before the general election that Arron Banks had offered £80,000 to defect to Reform.

The Times has seen a WhatsApp message from Jenkyns to a colleague in which she says Banks "tried to bribe me".

"Reform's Mr Banks offered to match my MPs salary with a job in his company if I defected to Reform," it read. "This is Reform's modus operandi; look How former Conservative MPs have publicly said Reform tried to bribe them to defect too."

She had previously spoken about the financial offer, made at a time Reform was trying to persuade MPs to join their ranks.

The leaked message risks embarrassing Farage because Jenkyns and Banks are now his highest-profile candidates in the local elections on Thursday.

Banks, who donated more than £8 million to the Leave campaign before the Brexit referendum in 2016, is standing as a mayoral candidate in the West of England, while Jenkyns is hoping to be the mayor of Greater Lincolnshire.



Dame Andrea Jenkyns with Nigel Farage in Scunthorpe on Tuesday PHIL NOBLE/REUTERS



PETER BYRNE/PA

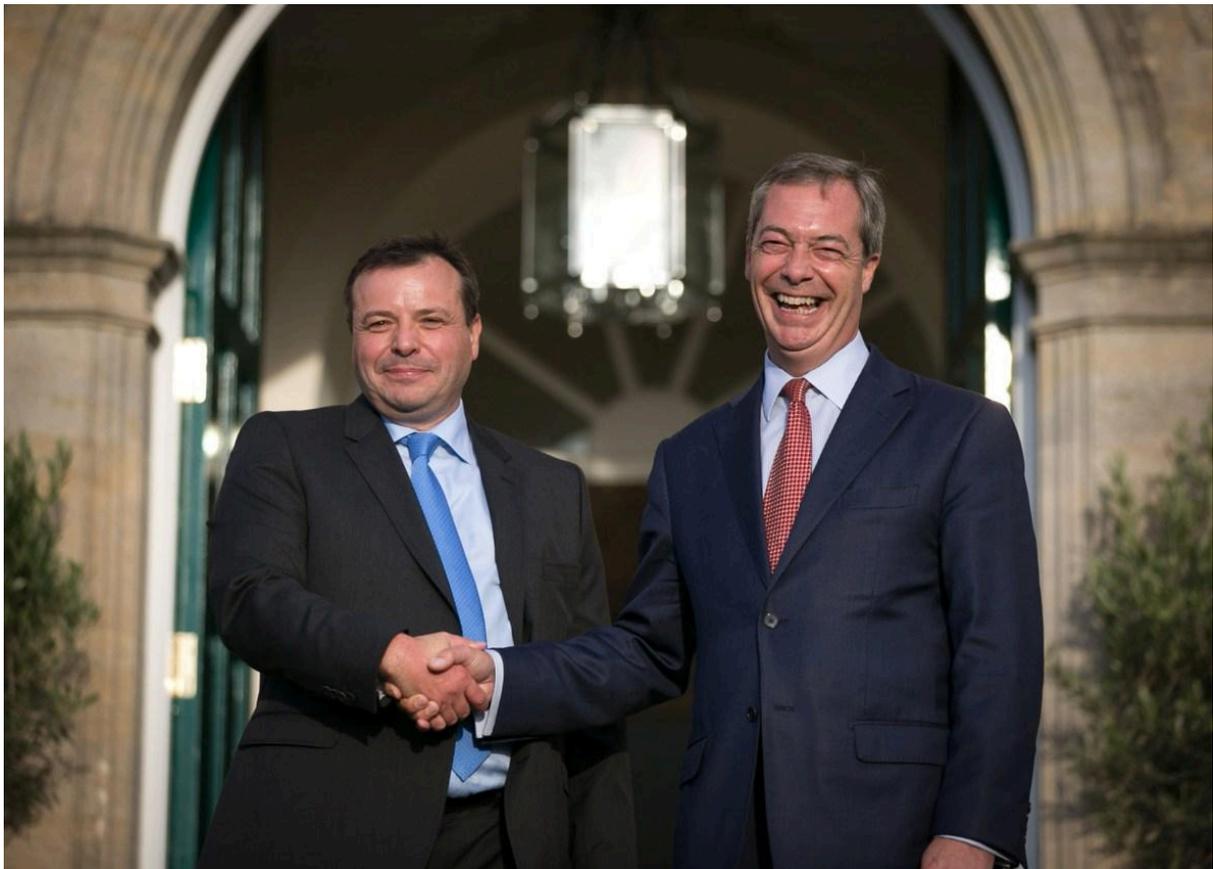
The party denied the claim made in the WhatsApp message. “This bogus allegation is from before the 2024 general election and she never joined,” a spokesman said. “No party official has ever offered Andrea or anyone else monetary compensation for joining the party.”

Banks declined to comment, telling *The Times* on Tuesday: “I’m not really interested in text messages ... write what you want to write.” He later added: “I don’t comment on leaks and text messages that may or may not be correct, so there we go.”

Labour asked the parliamentary standards commissioner, Daniel Greenberg, to investigate what happened last year but it is understood that nothing was taken forward because neither Jenkyns nor Banks were MPs at the time.

Jenkyns contested the general election as a candidate for the Conservative Party but finished second to Labour in her Yorkshire seat. She switched her membership to Reform in November, announcing her candidacy to be mayor of Greater Lincolnshire at the same time.

A Conservative source said: “Once again there are serious questions hanging over Reform. With one of their MPs being a convicted criminal, the party still consumed by internecine warfare, and now a bribery scandal engulfing two of their most high-profile candidates, it is clear this is a house of cards ready to come crashing down — it’s not a serious political party.”



Banks with Farage in 2014. He donated £8 million to the Leave campaign before the Brexit vote. MATT CARDY/GETTY IMAGES

Lee Anderson, the Reform MP for Ashfield who used to be deputy chairman of the Conservative Party, previously made a similar claim about a defection offer. He said in November 2023 that he was offered a job for five years on an £80,000 salary if he defected to Reform.

Banks said last week that he believed local mayors were a “meaningless job” with little power to help anyone. He joked that he would appoint a deputy mayor and “give him instructions” from a château if he won. “I was hoping for an honourable second,” he said.

While Jenkyns has a clear polling lead in Lincolnshire, the West of England contest is wide open. A YouGov survey conducted between April 9 and 23 predicted that the Greens would win and Banks would be in third place, while More in Common research suggested that Labour would win and Banks would be fourth.

Reform is predicted to surge ahead of the Conservative Party and has a strategy to target Labour-held red-wall areas that are disillusioned with Sir Keir Starmer’s first eight months in power.

2. Small boat crossings pass 10,000 in record-breaking year

More than 10,000 migrants have arrived in the UK on small boats so far in 2025 — the earliest in a calendar year that the milestone has been reached.

Home Office figures showed that 473 migrants crossed the Channel in eight boats on Monday, taking the total for this year to 10,358 in 186 boats.

It is 45 per cent higher than the 7,167 that had arrived in the same period in 2024. Last year, the figure of 10,000 was not reached until May 24, while in 2023 it was June 17.

More migrants were seen making the crossing on Tuesday as people smugglers took advantage of the warm weather. Pictures showed arrivals being brought ashore in a Border Force boat wearing life jackets and being met by officials in Dover, Kent.

Labour has blamed the record on the higher number of “red days”, which refers to when Border Force expects large numbers of crossings because of calmer conditions in the Channel.

Yvette Cooper, the home secretary, told Times Radio that the government was attempting to change the situation whereby the “impact on our border security of the weather is so significant”.

She also pointed to changes that are being introduced by the French from May. These will allow police and rescue services to intervene for the first time to stop boats once they are in the water because of the risk to life.

Commenting on the 10,000 milestone, Chris Philp, the shadow home secretary, said: “Britain’s borders are being torn apart under Labour. This year is already the worst on record for small boat crossings after over 10,000 illegal immigrants arrived in Britain but Labour just sit on their hands.”



Chris Philp, the shadow home secretary, said little was being done to improve the situation. JAMES MANNING/PA

The record number of crossings are pushing up demand for asylum accommodation. There are more than 100,000 asylum seekers in taxpayer-funded accommodation, including more than 38,000 in hotels.

Megan Smith, a solicitor at Deighton Pierce Glynn, which represents some asylum seekers in the UK, told the home affairs committee on Tuesday that the Home Office and private companies responsible for providing accommodation were failing to protect particularly vulnerable asylum seekers. She told MPs: “Examples of that would include small children, newborn babies — who are in hotels for months, sometimes years. I’ve seen cases of two years in overcrowded rooms.”

Cooper has also faced criticism for not going far enough with new measures against failed asylum seekers and foreign criminals who use the courts to remain in the UK.

She has announced that migrants convicted of sex offences and placed on the sex offenders register will be barred from gaining asylum in the UK using the UN Refugee Convention.



Yvette Cooper, the home secretary, said the government was working to lessen the impact of weather conditions. STEFAN ROUSSEAU/PA

However, the Home Office said the measure would not stop migrants using Article 3 and Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which protect against inhumane treatment and the right to a family and private life. They are the most commonly used to appeal against rejected asylum claims and attempts to deport migrants.

It comes after dozens of recent cases that have exposed the difficulty faced by the Home Office to remove foreign sex offenders because of the ECHR. In February, a Zimbabwean paedophile was allowed to remain in the UK after an immigration tribunal judge ruled that he would face “hostility” if he was deported to his home country, which would breach his rights under Article 3 of the ECHR.

In a second case heard in January, a judge blocked the deportation of a Jamaican man who raped a sleeping woman after his release from prison because he is bisexual.

Peter Tatchell, the veteran LGBT rights campaigner, has revealed that his charity is being contacted by as many as 30 “fake homosexuals” every single day who claim they are gay in order to claim asylum.

The Peter Tatchell Foundation has received an increase in small donations from Pakistani men who are seeking membership cards as “evidence” and “proof of homosexuality” as part of their asylum claims to prevent being removed from the UK.

He told the Daily Mail that he had written to the Home Office in January to report the apparent abuse.

Tatchell wrote: “It has come to our attention that some asylum applications from South Asia have referenced the Peter Tatchell Foundation in support of their claims to secure asylum.

“For the past 18 months, we have noticed almost daily donations of less than £3, sometimes as many as 30 in a single day.

“It is apparent many of these donors are likely asylum applicants. We have also received emails from some of these ‘donors’ requesting membership cards or letters for their asylum applications.”

Meanwhile, Cooper insisted that a separate review would attempt to restrict the use of Article 8 claims. She told Times Radio: “I do believe it is possible to change the way in which Article 8 is being interpreted.

“Because, in practice, what’s happening is partly about the way in which our laws are operating; it’s about the way in which, I think, there’s been a bit of an abdication of responsibility to set down the way in which our laws should operate — and too much has been left to ad hoc decisions by the courts. But that review is under way ... we will bring forward the conclusions,” she said.

Speaking to BBC Radio 4’s Today programme, Cooper said the government was reviewing the issue because respect for family life was “supposed to be balanced against other issues”, including against the public interest, government and parliament to set policies and respect for border security.

“We do think it is possible to have a stronger framework that is set out around the way in which international law should be interpreted,” she said. “We obviously continue to comply with international law but it’s about how it is interpreted.”

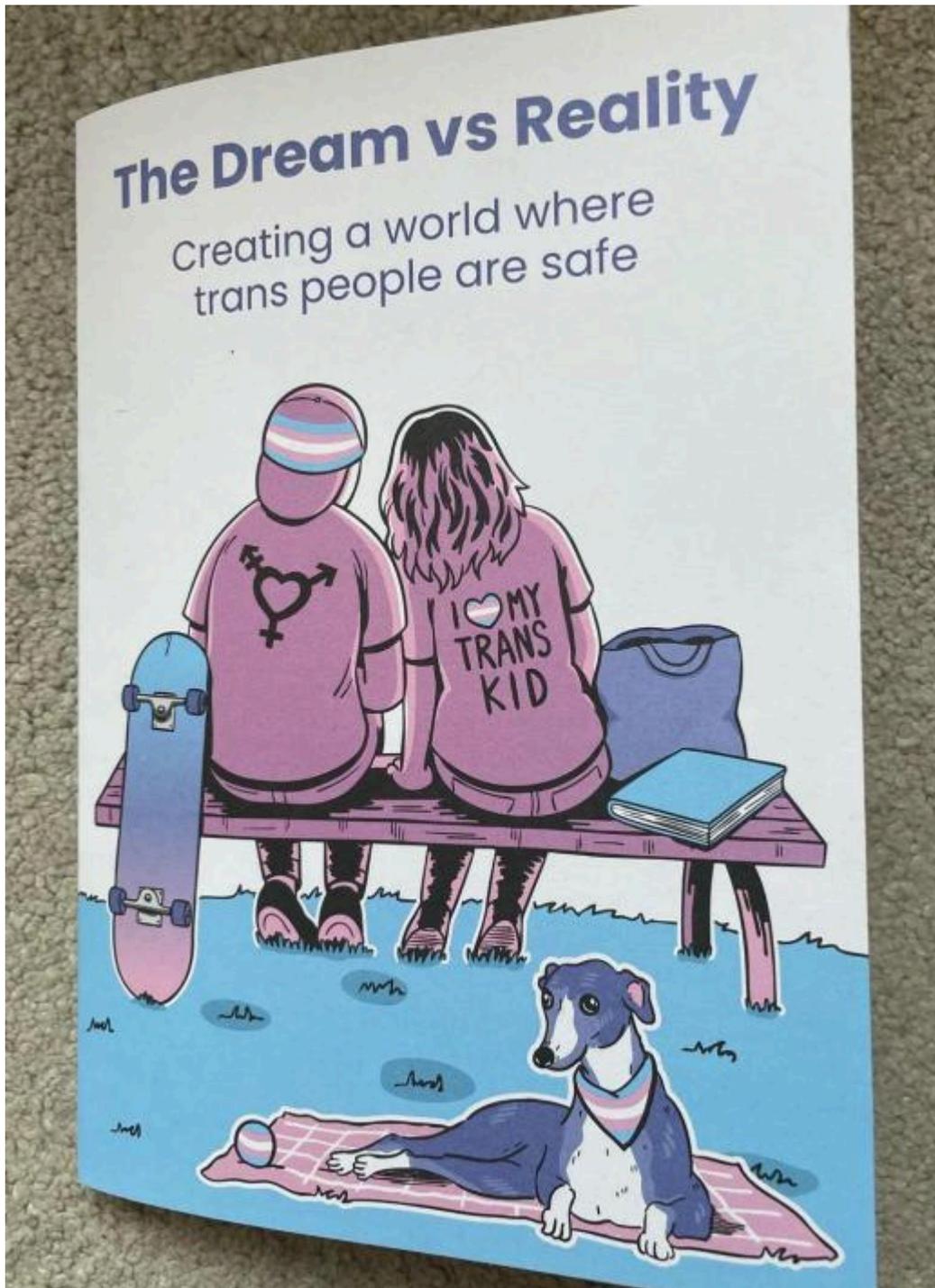
3. Lush put trans ‘propaganda’ leaflets in party bags for children

The retailer Lush Cosmetics put an information leaflet that made unfounded claims of a “media assault” against transgender people in the party bags of seven and eight-year-old children.

Young girls attending a birthday event at one of the chain’s outlets, where they made bath bombs and soaps, were handed the 24-page booklet alongside products when they left.

The document claims on its opening page that trans people have been targeted by a “calculated media assault” designed to “distract from global crises”. It explains that the media is trying to “shift attention from those nicely off, while the rest of us struggle”.

It also claims that the media is “encouraging violence” against trans people and that many lives had been devastated by a “tidal wave of hate”.

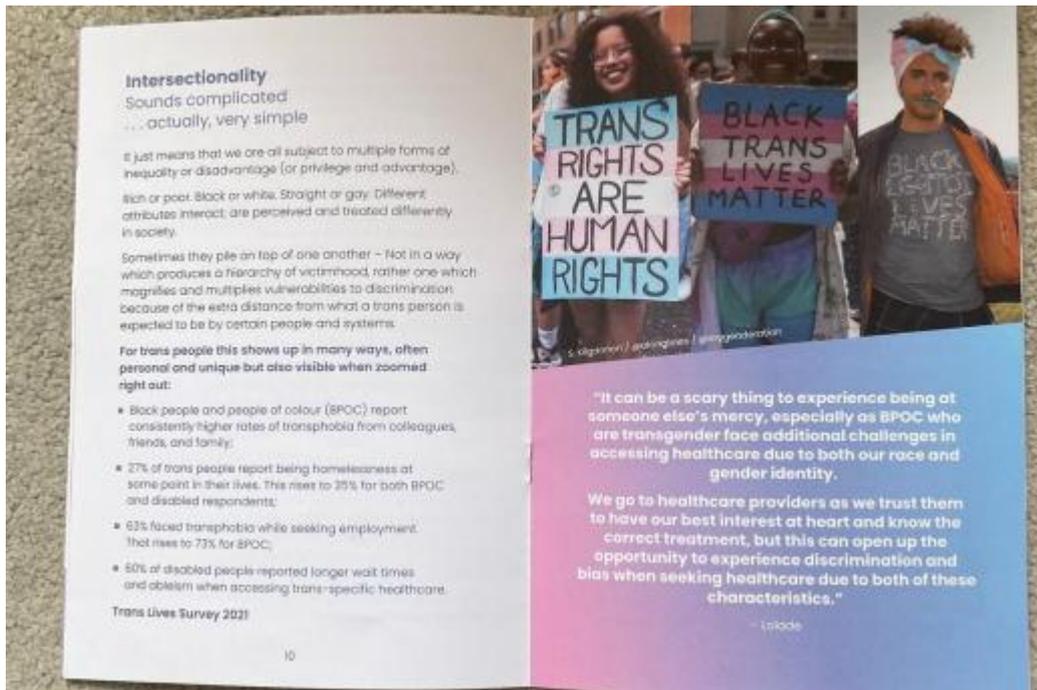


Lush put the leaflet in children's party bags

The document, which was written by the charity TransActual and produced by Lush "in solidarity and allyship with trans people", goes on to explain some of the terms that trans people use to identify themselves.

It says: "Some may consider themselves trans. Others do not. People may also identify as gender-queer (GQ), gender-fluid, agender, nongender, third gender, bi-gender, trans man, trans woman, and neutrois." The leaflet also explains "intersectionality", stating that while it "sounds complicated", it is "actually, very simple".

"It just means that we are all subject to multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage (or privilege and advantage)."



The document compares modern America with Nazi Germany. It says: "In the 1930s, the Nazis destroyed the world's first gender clinic. They burned its books, and sent trans people to concentration camps. Much learning was lost.

"There are echoes of that in the USA today, as trans individuals see their passports confiscated, birth certificates torn up, history erased, healthcare banned and legal protections removed."

It then tells the story of a trans student in the US who killed herself after her Saudi Arabian family "hired lawyers and fixers" to take her back home.

The leaflet includes a section on the Cass Review and puberty blockers. It claims that Dr Hilary Cass's independent study of gender identity services for children "set a standard of proof" that is "unique to trans healthcare". It then states that puberty blockers have been banned even though they have "no major side-effects".

The Cass Review says that the available evidence suggests puberty blockers can compromise bone density in growing adolescents and may reduce psychological functioning.

One mother who attended the party described the leaflet as "fully propaganda in tone" and questioned its appropriateness for young children.

The woman, who did not want to be named, said: "I feel fairly 'live and let live' about what people over 18 want to do but to put this in bags going home with seven-year-old girls seems really shocking to me. Pretty sure nobody is handing these out to little boys at football parties."

Lush has printed 20,000 of the leaflets and distributed them to its 101 stores across the UK. Alongside the leaflet, it sells a "Liberation" bath bomb in the colour of the trans flag, for which 75 per cent of proceeds going to TransActual and My Genderation, another campaign group.



The “Liberation” bath bomb

The retailer has said that the campaign was necessary because trans people had recently “come under increasing attacks in certain political and cultural spheres”. This month the Supreme Court unanimously determined that, within the context of the Equality Act, the terms “woman” and “sex” refer exclusively to biological sex at birth.

Fiona McAnena, of the charity Sex Matters, described the leaflet as “shocking propaganda” and a “shameful new low”.

She said: “The fact that Lush is presenting the story of a suicide to seven-year-old girls and telling them that puberty blockers have ‘no major side-effects’ is, frankly, a serious safeguarding matter. Parents need to know what they are exposing their children to if they let them attend events at Lush.

“The evidence runs completely counter to the alarmist and desperate claims of trans activists.”

Lush said: “The booklet was designed to be displayed in stores next to signage about the campaign and at till points, for people to take if they wished. It should not have been put directly into bags without being asked for and we have issued guidance to our staff to ensure that does not happen again.”

It added that questions about the content of the leaflet should be directed to TransActual. The group has yet to respond.

Lush often attracts controversy for its activism. In 2018, it launched a campaign in North America to support transgender rights. The initiative featured window displays with messages from trans people, guides on being “an ally” to the trans community and a limited-edition “Inner Truth” bath melt.

There was a public backlash after a Lush store in Dublin displayed a “Boycott Israel” sign in its window soon after the October 7 attacks in 2023. Lush clarified that the sign was the action of an individual staff member and not a company stance.

4. Mother and daughter go head-to-head in local election

There have been few things that have surprised Frances Leonard in local politics. The 74-year-old has served as a parish councillor, a district councillor, the mayor of St Albans and the chairwoman of her local Conservative association. However, on Thursday, she will be standing against her daughter.

Mrs Leonard said: “Somebody said to me: ‘So your daughter’s standing against you in Marshalswick & Colney Heath?’ I went: ‘Is she?’ I obviously didn’t pay attention to the nomination paper. I said: ‘Is [the Green group leader] having a laugh?’”

Mrs Leonard was born in Warwickshire, but moved to the St Albans area 51 years ago after meeting her future husband at the School of Pharmacy in London. On Thursday, she will be standing as the

Conservative candidate for Colney Heath & Marshalswick, hoping to beat the incumbent Liberal Democrats who have held a majority since 2019.

Coincidentally, her daughter, Sally Leonard, 46, who has an ethical and sustainable jewellery business, was asked to stand for the same county council seat for the Green Party. The pair said they laughed when they realised.

They talk most days, Mrs Leonard looks after Ms Leonard's two daughters and they see each other at weekends, when Uno is a family favourite.

Despite their opposing political parties, there are similarities. Both want the best for St Albans, both describe themselves as family-oriented and hard-working and both care for the environment — Ms Leonard buys from charity shops if she can, Mrs Leonard waters the plants with old bathwater — but mostly, they are very strong-willed.



The family avoid arguments by trying not to discuss politics at home **TOBY SHEPHEARD FOR THE TIMES**

“How are Sally and I similar? We like a fight I suppose,” Mrs Leonard said. “If I say something — it’s a bit of a joke now — but if I say ‘that’s black’, she’ll say: ‘Well it is blue really, isn’t it.’”

Both credited Mrs Leonard’s mother as a source of their opinionatedness. “She’s one of a long line of ladies with an opinion,” Ms Leonard said. “It must be genetic, right?”

Mrs Leonard is a lifelong Conservative along with her husband, Graham. She said that both had been active in local politics for as long as she could remember. He is standing for the party in St Albans South as a paper candidate.

Mr Leonard agreed that both women were “hard-working people, not the type to sit around” but added they were “quite happy to argue their point”. (He also said he expected Mrs Leonard to be in with a better chance on Thursday.)



Graham Leonard

When Ms Leonard and her brother Tom were younger, their parents used to host committee rooms at their house. “They both taught us to be politically active and think for ourselves,” she said. “And the conclusion I came to was the opposite of my mother.”

The family were surprised when Ms Leonard started supporting the Greens, and Mr Leonard predicted that his children would become Conservatives in the future. As a result, they do not discuss politics at home to avoid arguments.

“That’s the healthiest way to do it,” Ms Leonard said, “If we’re cooking a roast, we’re cooking a roast, we’re not taking on the thorniest political issues of the day. I don’t think we’re that different from all the other households with different politics, we’re just standing in the same place.”



TOBY SHEPHEARD FOR THE TIMES

She said she had her fingers crossed for Thursday but was realistic that the Greens are the minority party. “As a teeny tiny party it’s important to have representation wherever we can,” Ms Leonard said. “It’s about representation and I’m happy to go where I am of best use.”

How would she celebrate a victory? “Maybe go round to my mum’s house with a big green flag,” she said, but admitted that she would also be pleased for her mother if it were the other way round.

On the possibility of her daughter winning, Mrs Leonard said: “I’ll never hear the last of it, will I?”

5. Rap trio Kneecap apologise over ‘good Tory is a dead Tory’ video

The controversial Irish rap group Kneecap have apologised to the families of two murdered MPs after video emerged in which they appeared to make incendiary comments about “dead Tories”.

The trio posted a lengthy statement on X in which they sent “heartfelt apologies” to the families of Sir David Amess and Jo Cox, having faced criticism from Downing Street and Kemi Badenoch, the Conservative leader, after a video surfaced from one of their gigs.

Taken from a performance in November 2023, it appears to show one of the trio glorifying violence against politicians, saying: “The only good Tory is a dead Tory. Kill your local MP.”



Outside the Egyptian Theatre in Utah before the start of the Sundance Film Festival last year, where a film about the group won an awardMICHAEL BUCKNER/DEADLINE/GETTY IMAGES

The video has been condemned by Katie Amess, the daughter of Sir David Amess.

It is being examined by counterterrorism police, along with a second video from a performance in London last November in which one member of the group appears to shout: “Up Hamas, up Hezbollah.”

In the statement, Kneecap said the group were victims of a “smear campaign”.

They wrote: “To the Amess and Cox families, we send our heartfelt apologies. We never intended to cause you hurt. Kneecap’s message has always been — and remains — one of love, inclusion, and hope. This is why our music resonates across generations, countries, classes and cultures and has brought hundreds of thousands of people to our gigs. No smear campaign will change that.”



The Labour MP Jo Cox, 41, was murdered in 2016; The Conservative MP Sir David Amess, 69, was killed five years later

The Belfast-based group said their recent criticism of Washington during a performance at the music festival Coachella earlier this month had provoked the backlash. During their performance, they displayed messages that read: “Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinian people”; “It is being enabled by the US government, who arm and fund Israel despite their war crimes”; and “F*** Israel. Free Palestine”.



The group said they were “unequivocal” in their condemnation of attacks on civilians and had never supported Hamas or Hezbollah. “We reject any suggestion that we would seek to incite violence against any MP or individual. Ever,” they said.

“An extract of footage, deliberately taken out of all context, is now being exploited and weaponised, as if it were a call to action.

“This distortion is not only absurd — it is a transparent effort to derail the real conversation. The real crimes are not in our performances; the real crimes are the silence and complicity of those in power. Shame on them.”

DUP leader Gavin Robinson said that the group’s “balaclava has slipped” and revealed a lack of coherency surrounding laws governing the glorification of terrorism in Northern Ireland.

Speaking in Westminster, Robinson highlighted plaques in the House of Commons commemorating IRA victims Ian Gow, Airey Neave, Robert Bradford and Sir Anthony Berry. He said that “all were murdered by the Irish republican antecedents” to Kneecap.

“Whilst over the last 24 hours we have heard crocodile tears, confected apologies and whataboutery, nothing can be said that will mask the naked hatred that exists within those individuals for whom their balaclava has slipped,” he said.

“For far too long an eye has been turned against the glorification of terrorism in Northern Ireland. Confined to Northern Ireland apparently it seems to be quite acceptable and yet it keeps the wounds of our past open.”

Home Office minister Dan Jarvis said that he was happy to meet the DUP leader.

A Kneecap performance at the Eden Project was cancelled on Tuesday in the wake of the row. An Eden Sessions spokesman said: “Eden Sessions Limited announced today that the Kneecap show at Eden Project scheduled for July 4 2025 has been cancelled.”

The Eden Sessions are a series of concerts which take place at the Cornwall botanical gardens. A reason for the show’s cancellation was not given.

On Monday, Sir Keir Starmer’s spokesman said the prime minister believed the recent comments attributed to the group in the video were “completely unacceptable” and that he “condemns them in the strongest possible terms”.

The spokesman said: “We completely reject in the strongest possible terms the comments that they’ve made, particularly in relation to MPs and intimidation as well as obviously the situation in the Middle East.”

He added: “They should apologise. I think you have seen what they have said, I think it is half-hearted.”

Badenoch said Kneecap’s “anti-British hatred has no place in our society” and supported the police investigation. The Conservative leader had tried to block a £14,250 government grant to Kneecap when she was business secretary, after which the group won a discrimination case.

Labour has indicated that Kneecap is unlikely to receive any more public funding. David Taylor, the Labour MP for Hemel Hempstead, has written to the organisers of the Glastonbury Festival, urging them to remove Kneecap from this year’s line-up.

6. What Mark Carney’s win means for Keir Starmer and the UK

On the face of it, Mark Carney’s election victory presents a challenge to one of Sir Keir Starmer’s key strategic calls. While the prime minister in London has made mollifying President Trump a central plank of his foreign policy, Carney has surged to an improbable victory in Ottawa by adopting an unabashedly confrontational tone towards his southern neighbour.

Starmer says he “likes and respects” Trump, understands his arguments and has a “good relationship” with him — in the hope of favourable treatment. Carney, by contrast, has said that “Trump is trying to break us” and vowed defiance.

Already, those on the British left and centre are trying to make capital out of the contrast. Sir Ed Davey, the Liberal Democrat leader who hopes to take dozens of council seats off Labour in local elections this week, was quick to argue that “across the globe, it is liberals who are taking the lead in

standing up for prosperity, security and democracy in the face of Trump”. After Canada, “voters in England have the chance to send a similar message on Thursday”, Davey said.

On the Labour left, Jon Trickett wrote pointedly on social media that in Canada “the governing party changed its unpopular leader! Refused to bend the knee to Trump! Rallied the country behind a call for econ change! And came from 20 points behind to win the election! Makes you think!”

Yet, despite a growing political space on Labour’s left, Downing Street is unlikely to be too worried. The Canadian context, where Carney faced an immediate election with nothing to lose against a US threat to annex his country, is very different to the British one. The potential gains in terms of trade and security of not antagonising Trump are obvious to most in the UK and Starmer’s diplomatic approach has widespread approval across the political spectrum.

More than this, there is a clear upside for Starmer, concerning Carney as a person, that will prompt relief in Downing Street.

Firstly, there are clear diplomatic reasons. When Starmer became prime minister in July, five of seven members of the G7 were run by centrist or centre-left governments. President Biden was still in power in the US, Olaf Scholz was in charge of Germany’s centre-left coalition and Justin Trudeau — who helped Starmer burnish his credentials on the world stage when he was still in opposition — was prime minister of Canada.



Carney joined a meeting of senior Labour figures in 2023 to discuss the party’s plans for economic growthALAMY

Since then, Biden and Scholz have lost power as western democracies have pivoted to the right amid post-Covid economic challenges. Those around Starmer worried that if, as expected until a few months ago, the Conservatives triumphed in Canada, Starmer would be increasingly isolated among the UK’s key western allies on the international stage.

Things are now no longer so clear cut — and there is hope that the “Trump effect” could also dent the chances of Marine Le Pen’s National Rally party in France’s 2027 presidential election.

Secondly, there is the personal aspect. Starmer praised Carney’s “personal ties to the UK” and he was probably not only thinking of his stint as the governor of the Bank of England. An anglophile who studied at Oxford and has an English wife, Carney has both a deep understanding of the UK and a similarly centrist political viewpoint to that of Starmer.

Unusually for a foreign leader, Carney has explicitly endorsed Labour and has agreed to join a task force advising the party on its plan to set up a national wealth fund. He even appeared at its 2023 conference to praise the chancellor Rachel Reeves's "energy and ideas".

Even if Carney's ideas on Trump may differ, Starmer's energetic welcome for his victory is clearly genuine.

7. What will happen if Reform wins in your local council?

England needs a Department of Government Efficiency, just like Elon Musk's, for every county council, said Nigel Farage who vowed to strip out waste from local government if Reform win big at this week's local elections.

The Reform leader told the BBC: "We did thousands of freedom of information requests to have a look where money was being spent. I'm going to say this, we probably need a Doge for every single county council in England.

"Quite why Lancashire county council spent half a million quid on ergonomic chairs for their staff, I don't know. Quite why up to a third of council staff almost never come to the office, I don't know."

Farage said that his party would not cut back services if they took control of any councils but would focus on "cutting back the excess and increasing the productivity of staff".



The Reform leader told the BBC: 'Reform only wins the next election if it gets the youth vote' EFF OVERS/BBC/PA

He said: "One of the biggest problems in this country is the lack of productivity in our public sector, private sector too, public sector in particular, and the whole work-from-home culture, all that needs to go. A lot of people working with these councils, earning more money than the prime minister, are not delivering."

The Reform leader said that new technology that could be used to fill in potholes could help bring down bills, and he was taking inspiration from Elon Musk in wanting to review "inferior" contracts with a "fresh pair of eyes".

Asked about his relationship with Musk, who called for Farage to be replaced as the Reform leader, he said: “We talked about it. He was just trying to encourage me in a few policy areas, ones I wasn’t prepared to go down.”

Farage has been opposed to allowing Tommy Robinson, the far-right activist serving 18 months in prison for contempt of court, to join his political parties, describing him as “thuggish”.

However, Musk began making supportive comments about Robinson in January during a row over the handling of child sexual exploitation in British towns and cities.

Reform is hoping to do well in council and mayoral elections in Lincolnshire and will be expecting wins in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. The party will also put up a fight in the Runcorn & Helsby by-election being held on the same day after the resignation of its Labour MP. Reform is putting up more candidates than Labour or the Tories.



Farage added: ‘Elon [Musk] makes the whole task much, much easier’ JEFF OVERS/BBC/PA

Andrew Griffith, the shadow business secretary, did not rule out the Conservatives forming pacts with Reform on a local level. He told Sky News: “If people want a Conservative-led council, and I think they should because they run services better, rates are lower, then they’ve got to vote Conservative. There’s always been, after elections, a need for local councillors, themselves to disport how they’re going to run the local council.

“That won’t be needed if people vote Conservative, but if that is needed then historically people have done deals on a local council level with all sorts of groups.”

However, he advised against voting for the Liberal Democrats, whom he accused of promoting “quite extremist” policies, including promoting veganism when in charge of councils.

He said: “I’m as worried, for example, about Liberal Democrat pacts. Liberal Democrats have all sorts of extreme foreign policies. They typically promote veganism when they take control of the council, they’ve supported four-day weeks, which have damaged the interests of local residents.”

8. Kemi Badenoch: I wouldn’t want a man carrying out a mammogram

Male or trans doctors should never be allowed to carry out mammograms, Kemi Badenoch has said, as she called on the NHS to train up more female radiographers.

The Tory leader told Times Radio that she would not be happy to have a man carry out a mammogram, describing the process as “very intrusive”.

Mammograms are one of the few NHS procedures which are guaranteed to be carried out by a female doctor, but the Society of Radiographers said that male health workers should be allowed to perform them to help tackle workforce shortages.

Badenoch said that the solution was to train up more radiographers rather than to ask women “yet again to sacrifice their privacy and dignity to deal with a supply issue”.

“I’ve had a mammogram. It is a very, very intrusive process,” she said. “It involves the clinician holding both of your breasts for a long period of time, feeling them, manipulating them, putting them in the machine.

“I would not want a man doing that. [I] definitely would want a woman. So I think the solution is to get more radiographers, not to ask women yet again to sacrifice their privacy and dignity to deal with a supply issue. I don’t think that’s right.”

Asked if she would be happy to have a trans doctor carrying out the procedure, Badenoch said that would be unacceptable. “Trans women are still a biological male and I want a woman conducting it,” she said.



Nearly a fifth of vacancies for screening mammographers remain unfilledGETTY IMAGES
Women aged 50 to 71 are invited to have a mammogram every three years. The procedure can identify cancers that are too small to see or feel.

The Society of Radiographers has called for a change in policy amid “critical” staff shortages among mammographers — radiographers who specialise in breast imaging.

Officials from the society said male health workers could excel in the field but are being denied the chance because of their gender.

The vacancy rate among screening mammographers is 17.5 per cent, and the vacancy rate among symptomatic mammographers — who assess women who have found a lump in their breast or have a family history of breast cancer — is almost 20 per cent.

“Allowing men to work in mammography would help to reduce shortages, and therefore to reduce waiting lists,” said Charlotte Beardmore, the executive director of professional policy at the society. “That, in turn, would ensure that every patient is given the treatment they need, when they need it.”

A Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) spokesman said: “This government inherited a broken NHS where too many cancer patients are waiting too long for diagnosis and treatment, including for breast cancer.

“Through our Plan for Change, we are driving down waiting times, getting patients seen and treated faster. We will also tackle workforce shortages head on, and ensure the NHS has the staff it needs to be there for all of us when we need it.”

Meanwhile, delegates at the Society of Radiographers’ conference were also told transgender men should be included in the NHS breast screening programme.

Patients who are registered with their GP as male are not invited for routine screening, although their GP can refer them for screening if cancer is suspected.

The DHSC spokesman said: “Following the Supreme Court ruling, it is clear healthcare should be based on biology.

“The government will deliver a space where we can have respectful, honest conversations about where there might be challenges that arrive and resolve [them] using common sense.”

9. Sugar tax extended to milkshakes to tackle obesity and save NHS cash

Milkshakes and lattes are set to be hit by a sugar tax for the first time as Labour moves to extend the levy to hundreds more soft drinks, including Pepsi and Ribena.

Pre-packaged milkshakes and coffees will be covered by the levy, ministers said on Monday, ending an exemption they described as an anomaly. The present laws have mainly affected fizzy drinks.

In a move that goes further than expected, ministers said it was time to be more ambitious on unhealthy drinks, announcing that they will also lower the sugar content threshold at which the tax applies, catching some of Britain’s best-known brands and supermarket products which had changed recipes to avoid the previous levy.



Ministers are consulting on lowering the threshold at which the tax is imposed to 4g per 100ml GETTY IMAGES

Tax rates on sugary drinks will also rise 27 per cent during the course of parliament to make up for a freeze since 2018, ministers confirmed. They say that the move will cut obesity and boost the economy by keeping more people in work, after Sir Keir Starmer signalled last year he was ready to face down “nanny state” accusations to improve public health.

However, the prime minister faces claims that the move breaches a promise not to raise taxes for “working people” and comes after Wes Streeting, the health secretary, said he would not raise the price of food during a cost of living crisis.

In 2016 George Osborne, the Conservative chancellor, announced the levy on drinks with a sugar content of more than 5g of sugar per 100ml, a threshold which led to numerous brands reformulating products to avoid the tax.

This was hailed a success by campaigners, and resulted in the sugar content of soft drinks falling by 46 per cent, but officials now say that “the levy effectively created a ‘target’ of just below the 5g threshold, and products have clustered below 5g as a result”.

Ministers are consulting on lowering the threshold at which the tax is imposed to 4g. About 17 per cent of soft drinks sales are now between 4g and 4.9g of sugar per 100ml, and the new limit would catch an additional 866 products.

These include Sanpellegrino lemonade cans, which have 4.5g of sugar per 100ml. Nestlé, the brand’s parent company, reduced the drink’s sugar content by 40 per cent when the tax came into force in 2018, using a sweetener to maintain the taste instead.

Brands such as Rubicon, Lucozade, Fanta, Ribena, Old Jamaica Ginger Beer and IrnBru all had sugar content reduced just below the 5g minimum. Customers’ complaints about changes in flavour has led to brands releasing “premium” versions with the original sugar content intact.

Scrapping the exemption for milk-based drinks could lead to other manufacturers making changes. The supermarket version of the Starbucks caramel frappuccino, for example, has a sugar content of 9.4g per 100ml.



Pre-packaged lattes will also be covered by the levy^{ALAMY}

The tax applies to pre-packaged drinks, with those made on-site in cafés and restaurants exempt. A final decision on extending the tax is expected in the autumn budget.

From April 2027, the revised levy would add 18p per litre to the price of soft drinks with between 4g and 8g of sugar per 100ml, and 24p per litre to soft drinks with even higher sugar levels.

The Treasury has for now decided against introducing an extra third tax rate for drinks with more than 10g sugar per 100ml, a category which includes Coca-Cola.

Katharine Jenner, from the Obesity Health Alliance of charities and doctors, praised the “vital” move to extend the levy, saying the sugar tax had been “a clear success — cutting sugar consumption, particularly among lower-income groups, without harming sales”.

However, Christopher Snowdon, head of lifestyle economics at the Institute for Economic Affairs, described the sugar tax as an “epic fail”, saying that child obesity rates had continued to rise since it was imposed. “To justify an expanded tax on the basis of a hypothetical reduction of one calorie a day is absurd. Sugar taxes have never worked anywhere. What happened to Starmer’s promise to not raise taxes on working people?” he said.

In an impact assessment, the government argued that expanding the tax would take an average of about one calorie a day out of the diet of adults and children aged five to ten, and just over two calories for teenagers.

Officials say this will bring benefits of £4.2 billion over 25 years, including NHS and social care savings of £200 million and an £800 million boost to the economy through avoiding sickness absence.

James Murray, exchequer secretary to the Treasury, and Ashley Dalton, the public health minister, described the tax as a key part of the government’s strategy to combat obesity, adding that “it also plays an important role in our economic strategy by fostering a healthier workforce”.

They said the existing sugar levy may have prevented thousands of cases of childhood obesity while simultaneously cutting down on tooth decay, but argued: “Many products have been reformulated to just below the 5g sugar per 100ml threshold. Nearly a decade on, we believe it is time to set a more ambitious target.”

Extending the tax could save thousands more from becoming overweight or living with obesity, they said.

A spokesman for the British Soft Drinks Association, an industry body, said the decision was a “muddled and damaging shifting of the goalposts” that risked undermining years of reformulation investment with questionable positive health outcomes.

He added that lowering the threshold “comes at a time of major and unprecedented financial headwinds for our members, from record-high inflation and national insurance increases, to spiralling ingredient costs and incoming trade tariffs. Such cost increases have already impacted our members’ ability to grow their businesses and boost employment, and the lowering of the threshold risks making this even more challenging.”

Nigel Farage and the Tories hit out at the “nanny-state” measure, accusing Starmer of hiking taxes on the “simple pleasures” of ordinary families.

The Reform leader said: “I’m just sick to death of a government telling us how we should live, what we should do and taxing us more and more and more on any simple pleasures that we enjoy.”

He said government should not “meddle”, arguing state action did not work as “we’ve got an obesity crisis despite years and years of being told what we should and should not do”. He told BBC Breakfast: “This sort of nanny-state Labour government and the Tories were no better — I’m pretty sick of it, and I think many people are too.”



The measure was designed to tackle childhood obesity, the government said GETTY IMAGES

Although the sugar tax was introduced under the Conservatives, Mel Stride, the shadow chancellor, also criticised its extension. “At a time when they have already pushed up the cost of living for families, Labour seem determined to pile on even more costs with this new milkshake tax,” he said. “This a sucker punch to households who are being left poorer by this Labour government.”

A government spokesman said: “We want to raise the healthiest generation of children ever through our Plan for Change.

“Tackling childhood obesity is vital to this mission and in building an NHS that is fit for the future.

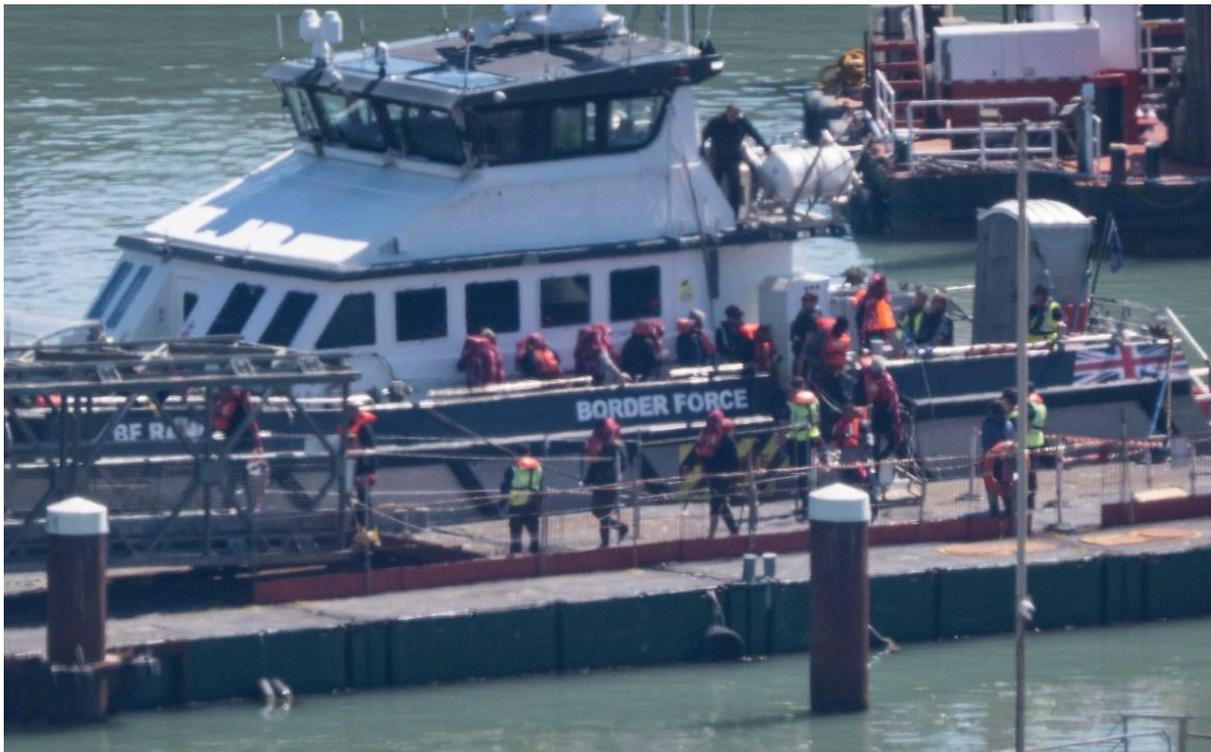
“The existing soft drinks industry levy has already halved the amount of sugar in shop-bought products, helped prevent thousands of cases of childhood obesity and reduced hospital admissions for tooth extractions among young children.

“But we are prepared to do more if the evidence is there, which is why we are consulting on extending the levy to potentially deliver billions of pounds of health and economic benefits.”

10. Migrants convicted of sex crimes to be denied asylum

Migrants convicted of sexual offences will be barred from claiming asylum under new rules announced by the government, although they could still use human rights law to block their removal. Refugees already granted asylum will be stripped of their right to remain in the UK if they are convicted of sex offences. They will also be made eligible for deportation even if their sentence is below 12 months, the current cut-off point for removals.

The move is the latest measure by Sir Keir Starmer's government to tackle the small boats crisis as the number of migrants crossing the Channel edges closer to 10,000 this year. Some 9,885 migrants have arrived so far, a record high for this time of the year, and Border Force is braced for a flurry of arrivals this week due to warm weather.



Migrants arriving at Dover after being picked up by Border Force crossing the Channel GARETH FULLER/PA

The crackdown on migrant sex offenders will apply to asylum seekers and refugees who commit an offence that places them on the sex offenders register — which includes crimes attracting sentences of less than 12 months.

The Home Office said it also intended to apply the change to sex offences committed abroad, as long as the individual had been placed on a country's sex offenders register.

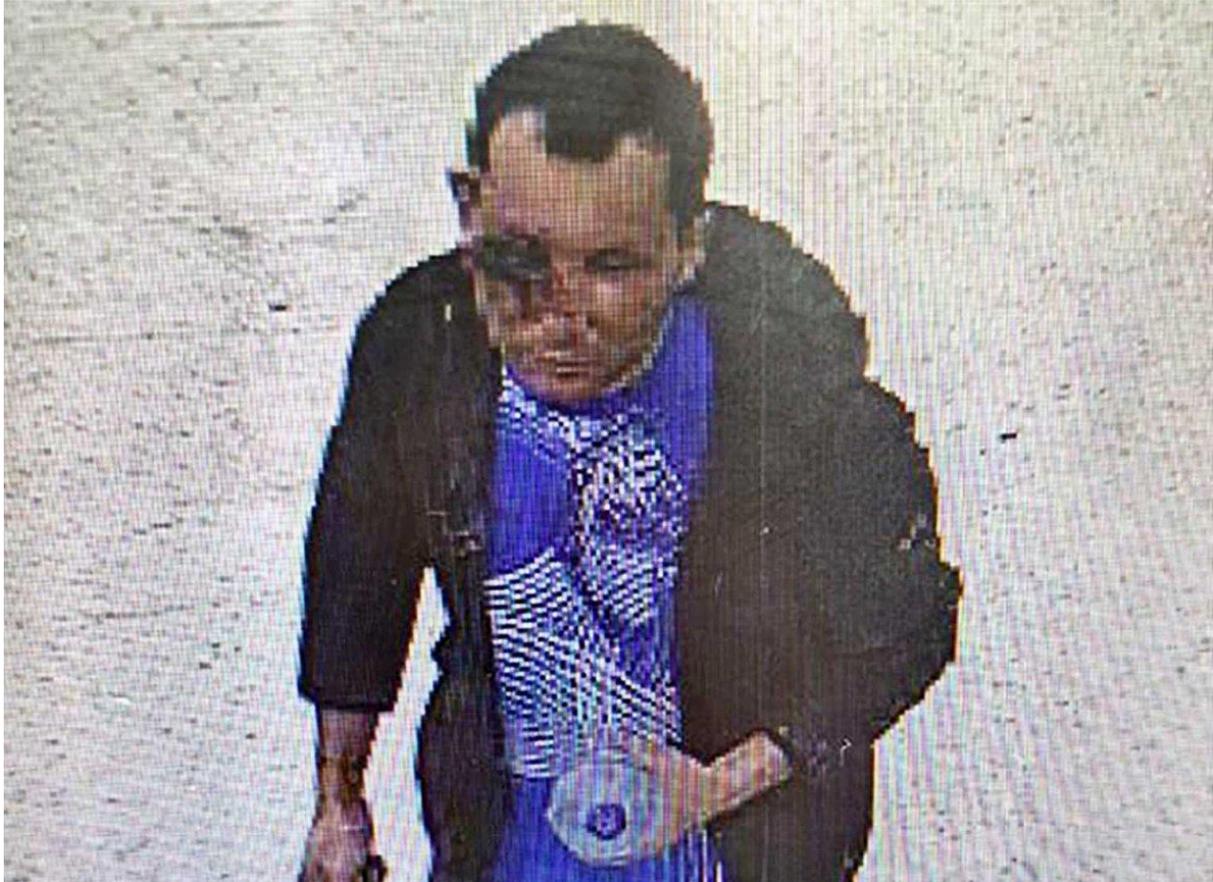
Under the Refugee Convention, countries can refuse asylum to some such as war criminals and those who have committed a "particularly serious crime" who present a danger to the community. Currently in the UK, this is categorised as a criminal handed a prison sentence of one year or more.

Yvette Cooper, the home secretary, announced that she would update this to include anyone convicted of a crime in the UK which places them on the sex offenders register, regardless of the length of their sentence.

The move, which will be changed through an amendment to the government's Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill currently going through parliament, will allow the Home Office to deny migrants refugee status before or after being granted asylum and make them eligible for deportation.

It is not clear how many cases it could affect, or the number of claims previously granted.

The move is designed to tackle cases like that of Abdul Ezedi, who attacked a woman and her two daughters with an alkali chemical last year. He was granted asylum despite being a convicted sex offender.



Abdul Ezedi METROPOLITAN POLICE/PA

The 35-year-old had been placed on the sex offenders register for ten years and ordered to carry out 200 hours of unpaid work after pleading guilty to charges of sexual assault and exposure in 2018, two years after his first asylum claim was rejected.

He was later granted asylum by a judge in 2020, who accepted he was a Christian convert and that he would be in danger because of his faith if he returned to his home country of Afghanistan.

However, Home Office officials said the law change would not stop a migrant convicted of a sex offence using the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) to block their removal from the UK.

This is because Article 3 and Article 8 of the ECHR — which are the most commonly used by migrants in the UK to appeal against deportation and protect against torture, inhumane degrading treatment and the right to a family or private life — are a “higher bar” than the UN Refugee Convention.

The home secretary said she believed it was “possible to change the way” in which rules around the right to a family life are being interpreted.

Yvette Cooper pointed to a government review under way which is “looking at the way in which article 8 (of the European Convention on Human Rights) has been operating in the courts”.

Asked whether she had confidence whether that will change how the ECHR works in this country, Cooper told Times Radio on Tuesday: “I do believe it is possible to change the way in which article 8 is being interpreted.

“It’s partly about the way in which our laws are operating ... there’s been a bit of an abdication of responsibility to set down the way in which our laws should operate, and too much has been left to ad-hoc decisions by the courts.

“That review is under way at the moment, we will bring forward the conclusions.”

Recent cases have exposed the difficulty faced by the Home Office to remove foreign sex offenders due to the ECHR.

In February, a Zimbabwean paedophile was allowed to remain in the UK after an immigration tribunal judge ruled he would face “hostility” if deported to his home country, which would breach his rights under Article 3 of the ECHR.

In a second case heard in January, a judge blocked the deportation of a Jamaican man who raped a sleeping woman after his release from prison because he was bisexual.

Chris Philp, the shadow home secretary, said the failure to act on ECHR claims would make the government’s proposed changes pointless and said the announcement was “a piece of desperate pre-election performance” before Thursday’s local elections.

He said: “The fact is that foreign criminals frequently use human rights, not just asylum, claims to stay in the UK. Yet just a few weeks ago Labour voted against a Conservative amendment to disapply the Human Rights Act from immigration matters, including foreign criminals.

“Labour also voted against a Conservative amendment to deport all foreign criminals. Labour is not serious about this or they would have supported these amendments — Labour are just engaged in pre-election posturing.”

The government is also likely to face criticism from some of its own MPs and refugee charities that view the changes as tarnishing asylum seekers as sex offenders.

A Home Office source insisted the law change was not “demonising” asylum seekers, but made clear there are “high standards” in the asylum system and that people who come to the UK and apply for asylum must respect the rules.

Cooper will also amend the border security legislation by setting a 24-week target for first-tier immigration tribunals to decide on appeals of those living in asylum seeker-supported accommodation, or who are foreign national offenders, in a bid to cut the asylum backlog. It is currently taking an average of more than 50 weeks for appeals to be heard.

Asylum seekers living in taxpayer-funded accommodation, including more than 38,000 in hotels, will be prioritised.



TIM ROOKE/HOME OFFICE/PARSONS MEDIA

Cooper said: “Sex offenders who pose a risk to the community should not be allowed to benefit from refugee protections in the UK. We are strengthening the law to ensure these appalling crimes are taken seriously.

“Nor should asylum seekers be stuck in hotels at the taxpayers’ expense during lengthy legal battles. That is why we are changing the law to help clear the backlog, end the use of asylum hotels and save billions of pounds for the taxpayer.”

The Home Office also announced that artificial intelligence would be used to support caseworkers processing asylum claims, by summarising interview transcripts and accessing country advice.

The Law Society of England and Wales raised concerns that the target for first-tier immigration tribunals will be “unworkable” in practice as the justice system was already struggling to cope with current demand.

Richard Atkinson, the president of the society, said: “There is a long wait for appeals to be processed due to the sheer volume of cases going through the system. Efforts to clear the legacy backlog of asylum claims have led to more initial claims being refused, resulting in the number of appeals increasing even further.”

11. UK risks Trump’s ire with EU partnership agreement

Britain will risk angering President Trump next month by signing up to a statement of shared “geopolitical values” with the European Union that cuts across many of the US leader’s key international policies.

In a draft preamble to a new strategic partnership between the UK and EU, due to be unveiled at a summit on May 19, the two sides emphasise support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity, the Paris climate agreement and open and free trade.

The statement could be seen in Washington as an overt signal that Sir Keir Starmer's government is aligning itself with Brussels, with nervousness in Whitehall about how the reset will be viewed by Trump and his key officials.

Ministers are hoping to seal a trade deal with the United States, which could lower tariffs on UK cars and other exports, before May 19 but admit that there is no certainty this will happen.

The concern is that, unless it is signed before the EU summit, the deal with Brussels could blow up the trade negotiations.

The document, shared with EU members in recent days and passed to Reuters, is framed as a "geopolitical preamble" to the strategic partnership.



Starmer met President Trump at the White House in February, but the UK has yet to secure a trade deal with the USCARL COURT/REUTERS

Although it does not mention the Trump administration, several elements of the text present a striking contrast to US policies.

The draft states: "We reaffirmed our continued support for Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders. We confirmed our shared principles of maintaining global economic stability and our mutual commitment to free and open trade"

It adds that the UK and EU will continue working "on how we can mitigate the impact of fluctuations in the global economic order". The document also reiterates that Britain and the EU are committed to multilateralism.

"We remain committed to keeping the Paris agreement goal of limiting global temperature rise to 1.5C within reach," it said.

The reset is expected to include a defence and security pact and a move to end checks on food exports across the Channel in return for the UK following European food safety standards.

This had been a stumbling block in trade negotiations with the US as the Trump administration has called on the UK to allow the import of products such as chlorinated chicken and hormone beef, which are banned in Britain and the EU.

Government sources insisted that there was nothing in the text that was "anti-Trump" and that the partnership was about closer co-operation with the EU in areas of mutual interest.

A spokesman said: “We are not providing a running commentary on our discussions with the EU; these are ongoing and cover a wide range of issues.
“We are clear that we will always act in the national interest to secure the best outcomes for the UK.”

12. Keir Starmer warns of tough local elections as Reform targets Labour

Sir Keir Starmer has admitted that Labour faces a “tough” set of local elections on Thursday, with possible defeat to Reform in a by-election and two mayoral contests in its northern heartlands.

Two polls have suggested that Nigel Farage’s party is on track to overturn Labour’s 14,700 majority in the Runcorn & Helsby by-election which was triggered by the resignation of Mike Amesbury, the former MP who was convicted of punching a constituent.

Labour is also facing potential defeat to Reform in the first combined Hull & East Yorkshire mayoral election and in Doncaster where its mayor won a 10,000 majority four years ago.



Luke Campbell, the former professional boxer and Reform candidate for Hull & East Yorkshire, with Nigel Farage
RYAN JENKINSON/GETTY IMAGES

It is also expected to be a bad night for the Conservatives who are defending 940 council seats they won in 2021 when Boris Johnson was at the height of his popularity.

The Liberal Democrats are confident of taking scores of seats from the Tories in the south of England and claim that they could end the night controlling more councils than Kemi Badenoch’s party.

The Tories are also worried about losing the Lincolnshire mayoral race to Reform — highlighting the threat to both main parties.

One senior party strategist said the view of many voters was now “anyone but the Tories and Labour”, contrasting it with the mood at the general election when Labour won a landslide at the expense of the Conservatives.

Starmer acknowledged on Monday that the elections would be “a challenge”.

He said: “It’s going to be tough. Most governments after a general election face a tough set of local elections at the first opportunity afterwards, and of course we’ve had to take tough but right decisions.”

But he insisted that “record investment put into the NHS” and the rise in the minimum wage meant Labour had “a positive story to tell”.

He also accused Reform of wanting to charge patients to use the NHS, voting against workers’ rights and having a “pro-Putin foreign policy”.

He said: “We’ve got a positive case to tell. It’ll be tight, I know that, every vote will count and we are fighting for every vote.”

Badenoch also acknowledged that the local elections presented the Tories with a challenge amid concerns over the party’s lacklustre campaign and continuing speculation about her leadership.

Both Baroness Maclean of Redditch, the Conservative Party’s head of strategy, and Lee Rowley, Badenoch’s chief of staff, have been on holiday in the run-up to polling day. Maclean only returned from the Himalayas this week.



Victoria Atkins, the shadow environment secretary, and Kemi Badenoch campaigning in Lincolnshire on Monday STEFAN ROUSSEAU/PA

Justin Tomlinson, a former minister and MP for North Swindon, has been given the role of campaign director for the local elections, but has come under fire from party activists for working only three days a week.

He said he had been brought in as an “experienced campaigner” to provide support and training and to share best practice. “That is exactly what I do,” he said.

Appearing on ITV’s Good Morning Britain, Badenoch said the Tories needed to “fight for every single vote” and “remind people about our record and how well we have done at local government level”.

“This is not a referendum on national issues, but local ones,” she said.

“I’ve been travelling all around the country, and one of the councillors I was with, we were on a doorstep, and he showed a leaflet of Reform saying ‘we’re going to stop the boats’. That’s not what people are voting on on Thursday.

“We have said that we are going to tackle immigration, but this week’s elections are about who’s going to fix the roads, pick up the bins.”

Professor Sir John Curtice, the polling expert, said the polls would be a five-way race, pointing out that Reform was fielding 1,640 candidates — more than any other party.

“Reform are now at 25 per cent in the national opinion polls as opposed to the 15 per cent they got at the last election,” he told the BBC Today programme.

“So if they can emulate that kind of performance then it may well be that not only do Reform pick up votes but in contrast to the general election start to pick up [significant numbers] of seats.”

13. Rachel Reeves’s £100 billion plan ‘not enough to revive public services’

Rachel Reeves has been warned her £100 billion investment boost will not be enough to repair crumbling public services while also kick-starting growth.

The chancellor will face tough choices between modernising hospital scanners, building council houses and creating new rail and road links to stimulate the economy, the Resolution Foundation think tank estimates.

Reeves could be left with as little as £20 billion to allocate over five years with the rest of the money swallowed up by avoiding cuts to existing spending, it says.

At last year’s budget, Reeves loosened fiscal rules to allow her to borrow tens of billions more for infrastructure, arguing that improving Britain’s dismal investment rates was “the only way to drive economic growth”.

She topped up Conservative plans by about £100 billion over five years, arguing this would boost the economy as well as help modernise schools and hospitals. The move was one of the biggest made by Reeves since taking office, and she will begin allocating the money in June’s spending review.

But the Resolution Foundation warns that this will be “far from an investment bonanza”, with much of the money going to reverse cuts planned by the Conservatives. Public investment will be “broadly flat” as a proportion of GDP over the parliament, it estimates.

Resolution calculates that keeping capital budgets for Whitehall departments the same in cash terms as recent years will swallow almost half the extra cash, leaving Reeves just £54 billion to boost investment in other areas.



In October's budget Rachel Reeves loosened fiscal rules to allow her to borrow tens of billions more for infrastructure. JUSTIN TALLIS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

If the chancellor wanted to ensure per person capital budgets were maintained in real terms, she would be left with only £24 billion for other priorities. Accounting for promises already made to boost defence spending would reduce this to just £20 billion, Resolution estimates.

"While the over £100 billion boost announced at the last budget sounds like a lot, it's not enough to fund all our economic infrastructure needs and rebuild Britain's fraying public services. Tough trade-offs lie ahead," James Smith, Resolution's director of research, said.

The NHS is struggling with a maintenance backlog of close to £14 billion, while Britain is near the bottom of rich-world league tables for hospital beds and MRI scanners per head. Schools have a £11 billion backlog, while ministers have promised thousands more prison places to avoid releasing criminals early.

At the same time, Angela Rayner, the deputy prime minister, is promising a council house building boom, describing previous social housing funds as only a "down payment" on cash expected in the spending review. Yet spending on transport schemes or research and development are seen as more likely to boost economic growth.

"Affordable housing should be targeted in major cities with acute housing needs, where its scarcity limits living standards and economic potential. This investment will help cities to attract new firms and workers — especially if affordable housing is complemented by better commuter transport links," Smith argued.

"Investing in Britain's social and economic infrastructure should ensure that gains from higher public investment are felt by families across the income spectrum, and throughout the country."

14. No extra money for NHS and teachers' pay rise, says No 10

Schools and hospitals will get no extra cash to fund above-inflation pay rises recommended for teachers and NHS staff, No 10 has said, leading unions to warn of industrial action if ministers do not change course.

The Treasury has budgeted for pay rises of 2.8 per cent and accepting recommendations for higher awards will mean that public services must find savings elsewhere.

The prime minister's spokesman said that money allocated in the budget "will need to fund the next round of public sector pay awards", adding: "There'll be no additional funding for pay if recommended awards exceed what departments can afford."

The Times revealed on Monday that independent pay review bodies had recommended that half a million teachers should get a rise of about 4 per cent and more than a million NHS workers should get about 3 per cent. Other public sector workers such as police, prison officers and soldiers are likely to be given higher settlements in recognition of the fact that they cannot strike.

Sir Keir Starmer said he would look at the recommendations and had not made a decision, but urged unions not to return to the picket lines. "I don't want to see strike action, I don't think anybody wants to see strike action," he said. Negotiating was a "much better way of doing business", he added.



A spokesman for Sir Keir Starmer said that public sector pay rises had to be funded with the money allocated by Rachel Reeves in the budget OHN SIBLEY/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Speaking during a visit to a health centre, he said: “The last thing [NHS staff] want to do is go into dispute again. It’s because of the way that we are working with the NHS that we are able to bring waiting lists down.”

Jo Galbraith-Marten, executive director of legal, employment and member relations at the Royal College of Nursing, said a 3 per cent pay rise “will do little to turn things around” and urged Starmer to ditch a pay review process “from a bygone era” and enter direct talks with unions.

“Any pay award must be fully funded. Taking resources away from frontline services is unfair on staff and bad for patients”, she said.

The union rejected last year’s 5.5 per cent pay award and Galbraith-Marten said it was surveying members “on what they think about the government’s 2.8 per cent proposal and what action, including industrial action, they might be prepared to take”.

Daniel Kebede, general secretary of the National Education Union, said he would ask members to “consider” a 4 per cent rise but warned they “stand ready to act industrially if we need to”.

He said: “What teachers need and education professionals need is an above-inflation pay award that takes steps to address the crisis in recruitment and retention, but most crucially is fully funded to ensure that there are no cuts to education provision.”

He told BBC Radio 4’s World at One: “We absolutely want to avoid strike action. This government can avoid it by publishing the report promptly and ensuring that pay awards are funded properly. If they’re not fully funded, then schools will have to make cuts which no parent, no teacher, wants to see.”

Pepe Di’Iasio, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders, said 4 per cent was “certainly an improvement on the 2.8 per cent proposed by the government — which was unrealistically low”, but warned that schools faced “very significant cuts” if the Treasury did not fund the increase.

“We cannot emphasise enough how important it is that the government does not rely on the fantasy that this can be addressed through ‘efficiencies’. The stark reality is that all ‘efficiencies’ were exhausted long ago and that this is simply a synonym for further cuts,” he said.

However, other unions were more circumspect. Helga Pile, acting head of health at Unison, the biggest NHS union, said: “The best route to fixing the NHS involves sorting health workers’ pay. That means a decent wage rise that will encourage experienced staff to stay and persuade new recruits to join.”

Stephen Kinnock, the care minister, urged unions to recognise that government was “in a very tight financial position” and had to make sure that “any pay deal that is done is within the financial constraints”.

He told Times Radio: “It is a very challenging position and we will be negotiating with our colleagues in the trade union movement according to that very challenging position that we’re in.”

15. Keir Starmer pushes to host Open at Trump’s Turnberry golf course

For years businessmen, negotiators and even US presidents have taken to the golf course to foster relations and strike deals.

But now Sir Keir Starmer is looking to take golf diplomacy one step further as part of his government’s efforts to woo President Trump, a keen golfer who is often pictured playing at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida.

British officials have been instructed to scope out the possibility of the president’s Turnberry golf resort in Scotland returning as host of the Open Championship, one of Britain’s most prestigious sporting events.

Officials at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) have discussed the prospect with the R&A, one of golf’s two governing bodies and the operator of the Open, the oldest golf tournament in the world.

Trump has repeatedly raised the prospect of the Open returning to Turnberry in phone calls with Starmer. Government sources said he remained very interested in the fate of his two golf resorts in Scotland. His second course is Trump International Golf Links in Aberdeenshire, which opened in 2012 but would not be considered as a host of the Open.

A source close to discussions said: “The government is doing everything it can to get close to Trump. One concrete thing is that DCMS have been involved in pushing for the Open to return to Trump-owned Turnberry.”



His most recent visit to Turnberry was in 2023^{ALAMY}

The earliest it could be hosted at Turnberry would be 2028, as the venues have already been decided until 2027.

The 800-acre Turnberry estate in Ayrshire, bought by Trump for £39.5 million in June 2014, last hosted the Open in 2009. It is among the pool of 14 links courses that have hosted the Open.

Trump has publicly called for the Open to return to Turnberry. In 2023 he declared: “Everybody wants to see the Open Championship here.”

King Charles also referenced Turnberry estate in his letter offering the Trump a state visit this year. The King pointed out that his foundation at nearby Dumfries House provides hospitality skills training for young people who “often end up as staff in your own establishments”.

However, the R&A is understood to have highlighted the significant logistical obstacles to hosting the tournament there again given the exponential growth in spectators since 2009, when 120,000 people attended.

The R&A is expecting 278,000 fans to attend the Open at Royal Portrush in Co Antrim in July.



The Open, held at Royal Troon last year, has seen attendance numbers grow rapidly since Turnberry last hosted KEVIN C COX/GETTY IMAGES

The obstacles include a lack of train and road links and accommodation, while security is also understood to be a major hurdle.

A spokesman for the R&A said: “We regularly engage with government and local government regarding venues. We have explained the logistical challenges around Turnberry to the government and they are aware of the position.”

Mark Darbon, the R&A’s chief executive, has said that the modern-day Open would need hotel accommodation of more than 60,000 beds in addition to better infrastructure. He has described the logistical requirements as “challenging at that venue”.

The R&A has also made clear that the focus of the championship must always be on golf. There are concerns that play would be significantly overshadowed by political rows and protests if it was to be held at the Trump-owned course. Seven people have been charged over vandalism to the estate’s Ailsa course by pro-Palestinian protesters last month, while Trump’s arrival at the Women’s Open in 2015 at the estate amid his first run for president overshadowed the first day of the tournament.

However, Darbon has been more positive on Turnberry’s chances than his predecessor Martin Slumbers, who he replaced in July last year.

Lavishing praise on the course in a Sky News interview this month, he described it as “brilliant”, adding: “At some point we’d love to be back there.”

Slumbers ruled out Turnberry hosting the Open in the wake of the January 6 attack on the Capitol in 2021.

DCMS declined to comment but government sources insisted that sport operated independently and decisions on tournament hosting venues were a matter for relevant bodies.

They added that any move to host the Open at Turnberry would be for the R&A and its operational team. The resort, which is managed by the president’s son Eric Trump, also declined to comment.



Turnberry's location on the remote west coast of Scotland makes travel difficult DAVID CANNON/GETTY IMAGES

However, the discussions reveal the lengths to which the UK government is going to woo Trump as Starmer attempts to strike a trade deal with the US to lower tariffs.

The prime minister would not be the first world leader to recognise the power of golf when dealing with Trump.

Last month Finland's President Stubb spent seven hours on the course with the US president at his Mar-a-Lago estate.

It appeared to succeed in hardening Trump's attitude on Russia after listening to Stubb's arguments about the need to impose a deadline on President Putin to abide by a ceasefire in Ukraine.

Stubb also left the course with an economic victory as Finland was awarded a bumper contract by Trump to build Arctic icebreakers.

Starmer, a keen footballer, is unlikely to take on Trump on the course himself. The only member of his cabinet to play golf is Lord Hermer, the attorney-general.

The last prime minister to play golf with a US president was David Cameron, who played a round against Barack Obama at the Grove in Hertfordshire in 2016. He was resoundingly beaten by Obama, who like Trump is a keen golfer, but emerged from the course insisting he was happy to have "only lost one ball" and was thrilled to par the first hole.

The Times revealed last week that Trump had taken back personal control of the company that runs Turnberry.

The US president stepped down as a director of Golf Recreation Scotland in 2017 after his first election victory and gave control to a trust run by his family, with his eldest son Donald Jr being the person with significant control and his younger brother Eric the only director.

Companies House documents filed on Thursday show that the president has now also been named as a person with significant control, having "significant influence or control over the trustees of a trust".

16. Primary school children 'should be taught about domestic abuse'

All primary school children should be taught about domestic abuse, a government tsar has said after a landmark survey found that thousands of children are being forced to suffer violence in the home alone due to a lack of funding.

Dame Nicole Jacobs, the domestic abuse commissioner, said children should be learning about issues relating to domestic abuse “earlier than maybe we’re comfortable” with, given the scale of abuse.

An estimated 800,000 children were victims of domestic abuse last year. This is in addition to about 2 million adult victims, which is about 4 per cent of the population.



Jacobs has published a report on children affected by domestic abuseBBC

In an interview with The Times, Jacobs said the government’s forthcoming spending review was a “critical” test of Sir Keir Starmer’s commitment to tackling violence against women and children. The prime minister has pledged to halve rates of violence against women and girls within a decade.

Jacobs has published a report on children affected by domestic abuse, which includes a survey of more than 260 service providers that offer support to child victims along with 168 statutory agencies responsible for commissioning domestic abuse services.

Jacobs said specialist services for child victims of domestic abuse were a “lifeline” during difficult and traumatic periods of abuse. The services offer children support such as counselling and play therapy, learning about healthy relationships and accessing emergency accommodation.

The survey found that 27 per cent were having to turn children away from vital support due to severe funding shortages.

More than half (51 per cent) said they had to place children on waiting lists due to the soaring number of referrals they were receiving. Others were forced to turn children away entirely and Jacobs said that in some cases this would have left children in unsafe situations and at risk of further harm.

Some 56 per cent surveyed had experienced cuts to their funding over the past five years, leaving more than a quarter (29 per cent) needing to make the difficult decision to stop providing a specialist support service to children.

The survey carried out by Jacobs is the first since children were first recognised in law as victims of domestic abuse rather than just witnesses. The Domestic Abuse Act defined a child victim as any child who “sees or hears, or experiences the effects of, the abuse”.

The report said the lack of funding was being compounded by statutory services such as education, social care and health lacking the resources, training and guidance to provide child victims with the support they needed, which forced already overburdened domestic abuse services to step in.

Jacobs said teachers needed better support and guidance from the Department for Education on “age-appropriate ways” of raising awareness of domestic abuse so children became better at spotting what inappropriate behaviour was.

She said this could be achieved from an early age at primary school through “building blocks” such as learning what respectful and bullying behaviour was in the first place. The domestic abuse commissioner said the government “has to face up to things that children are saying online about things like strangulation”. During her research she came across children asking online “how do you safely strangle?”

Jacobs said: “You have 800,000 children plus who are growing up and living in homes where there’s domestic abuse. Right now. And we know how much that impacts them. That impacts their daily life, their future possibilities, the kind of stress of that environment. So you have children who are not able to sleep at night, who live in that kind of chronic stress environment. We use these terms, ‘walking on eggshells’, but that’s what it’s like to live with an abuser.”

She added: “So children are living through that, having to go to school, sometimes missing school, sometimes not able to concentrate in school, not having friends over, having to make sense of what relationships are in that context as they’re growing older.

“There are so many impacts on children and we have very few services that actually focus on them full stop.”

Services are on the brink of collapse because many only received a one-year funding settlement from the government in the autumn and fear they will face significant cuts because of the severity of Rachel Reeves’s spending review in June, which will set budgets for the next three years. The Home Office is also due to publish its long-awaited strategy to achieve Starmer’s key election pledge to halve violence against women and girls, which is understood to include child victims of domestic abuse regardless of their gender.

Jacobs said she worried that the government did not realise how critical the spending review would be for children suffering domestic abuse across the UK.

She said: “I’m quite concerned and it is a very serious time for government to show what their commitment is to this [goal] of halving violence.

“The spending review and that strategy is a really critical time to understand how seriously is the government able to take this commitment and really addressing these gaps. It is beyond critically important. I mean, it’s kind of a mission imperative.”

17. NHS to test all children who identify as transgender for autism

Children referred to NHS gender identity clinics will all be assessed for autism, under new guidance.

A new network of gender clinics for under-18s is being set up to provide “holistic” care for children who identify as transgender.

The services are replacing the Tavistock gender identity clinic, which was found to have rushed children onto a medical pathway of puberty blockers without fully assessing their mental health.

Staff will examine children to see whether they have other conditions, including ADHD, autism, learning disabilities or mental health problems, which may be considered to be the underlying cause of their distress.

The specification for the new services, seen by The Telegraph, says: “Given the high prevalence of neurodiversity identified within this population, all those attending the NHS Children and Young People’s Gender Service should receive screening for neurodevelopmental conditions.”

It adds that if screening “identifies the presence of neurodevelopmental conditions, including autism spectrum disorder (ASD), a referral should be considered to the Paediatric Neurodevelopmental Service or Paediatric ASD service.”

A multidisciplinary team involving doctors and psychologists will assess eight key areas of a child's life, including whether they are attracted to members of the same sex, their family relationships, and a full medical history.

The guidance is due to be published for public consultation. It has been issued following the Cass Review into gender services, which highlighted how distressed children must be seen as a "whole person and not just through the lens of their gender identity".

Dr Hilary Cass, a retired consultant paediatrician and former president of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, who led the review, said it was vital that children who identify as transgender receive treatment for "ordinary" problems such as depression or autism.

Cass linked the rise in teenage girls struggling with gender identity with cases of "undiagnosed autism, which is often missed in adolescent girls".

The NHS has already opened two new gender clinics at Great Ormond Street in London and Alder Hey in Liverpool. Up to six more will be opened in the next two years.

The health service announced in February that the clinics will offer some children puberty blockers as part of a planned £10.7 million clinical trial.

Puberty blockers were "indefinitely" banned across the UK last year for children identifying as transgender, due to fears they are unsafe and harm bone and brain development.

However, under the planned trial, run by a team at King's College London, children seeking help from NHS services will be eligible for the drugs if their parents and doctors agree it is suitable. Puberty blockers suppress the release of sex hormones to pause physical changes such as breast development or facial hair.

The NHS said: "We will soon be going to full public consultation on this draft specification, which sets out the new holistic assessment framework that was described by Dr Cass in her report.

"NHS England has recently changed the referral pathway so child patients can only access gender services that we commission if they're referred by a paediatrician or a child and adolescent mental health worker."

18. Post Office paid £600m to carry on using faulty Horizon system

A former sub-postmaster has criticised the Post Office after it emerged that it has paid more than £600 million of public money to continue using the faulty Horizon IT system despite deciding to replace it in 2012.

The Post Office has been unable to ditch the system because it did not own the computer code for the core part of Horizon under the terms of the original £548 million deal with the Japanese IT company Fujitsu in 1999.

Senior Labour government figures were warned about potential problems with the terms of the agreement before it was signed, according to documents obtained by the BBC.

About 700 sub-postmasters were convicted of offences including fraud, false accounting and theft between 1999 and 2015 after the system falsely showed that money was missing in branch accounts.

The convictions were overturned by parliament last year.

Although the Post Office has wanted to switch suppliers since 2012, buying the rights to the code from Fujitsu or building a completely new system was considered too expensive.

The Post Office told the BBC that it finally obtained rights related to the Horizon software and code in 2023.

Christopher Head, a former sub-postmaster in Sunderland, said: "They [the Post Office] always say they 'have to be fair to taxpayers' on the compensation to postmasters. But there's no fairness to taxpayers on this."

The Post Office said it was committed to moving away from Fujitsu and the Horizon software. Its extended deal with Fujitsu is due to end next March.

The Department for Business said it was working to ensure the Post Office had the technology it needed.

19. More than 1,300 quango staff on salaries and benefits over £100,000

Sir Keir Starmer is under pressure to trim Britain's quango class more quickly after it was revealed that more than 1,300 staff are on salaries and benefits worth more than £100,000.

The prime minister has criticised the size of the state, saying it was too "flabby" and needed to become more "agile". This should be achieved by cutting the cost of public bodies outside politicians' control.

But new figures show that 223 quango staff took home a higher salary than the prime minister, who is paid £172,153.

Homes England was the body with the most staff receiving at least £100,000 in total remuneration, on 111. Packages covered all benefits including salary, expenses, bonuses, compensation for loss of office and pension contributions.

It was followed by the National Employment Savings Trust and Financial Conduct Authority, which had the second and third-largest numbers of staff receiving at least £100,000, on 56 and 45 respectively.

In total, 1,379 quango officials were on more than £100,000 in the 2023-2024 financial year, according to analysis compiled by the TaxPayers' Alliance (TPA). A total of 287 received benefits worth more than £200,000.

The figures exclude public service broadcasters, which the TPA included in an overall analysis that found 1,472 staff in publicly funded, non-ministerial controlled bodies had remuneration packages worth more than £100,000.

The findings expose the scale of the challenge facing Starmer as he seeks to cut spending on quangos — quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisations.

There are 32 quangos with at least ten staff whose remuneration is worth more than £100,000.

Mark Thurston, HS2's chief executive, was the highest salaried quango boss, on £618,195. Behind him was Andrew Haines, the chief executive of Network Rail, on £588,000.



Mark Thurston, chief executive of HS2 LtdLUKE MACGREGOR/BLOOMBERG/GETTY

The largest loss-of-office payment went to Michael Grenfell, the executive director for enforcement at the Competition and Markets Authority. He received a payment of £157,500.

Behind him was the director of countryside policy and management at the South Downs National Park Authority, who got a loss of office payout worth £136,773. Two senior figures at the Teaching Regulation Agency each received similar payments worth more than £90,000.

There were 28 quango bosses who received pension contributions of £100,000 or more, and at least 25 officials got a bonus greater than average earnings in the UK. Of these, five quango employees received a bonus of more than £100,000 in 2023-2024.

Quangos range from the Food Standards Agency to Sport England. Some offer real value to the government, the TPA said, such as Companies House, which manages corporate information.



Sir Keir Starmer — who earns less than 223 quango staff — has pledged to trim the “flabby” state in a crackdown on quangosWIKTOR SZYMANOWICZ/FUTURE PUBLISHING/GETTY IMAGES
The number of quangos has risen and so has the power they wield, the TPA said. That carried the risk that ministerial roles were being ceded to officials, while costs ballooned.

John O’Connell, the TPA’s chief executive, said the figures were shocking but the “bigger problem is that in many areas of government policy these quango bosses reign supreme, with minimal ministerial or parliamentary oversight”.

“The government may have signalled an intent to get a grip of the quango state, but as well as restoring political accountability there needs to be serious review of some of the functions they perform.”

The government said: “The chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has launched a review of all arm’s-length bodies across government and we will close or merge any that cannot be justified.

“We have already announced we’ll get rid of the largest arm’s-length body, NHS England, by merging it with the Department of Health and Social Care. This will increase efficiency and help to deliver the Plan for Change.”

The Cabinet Office also plans to cut civil service administration costs by 15 per cent by 2030, redirecting spending to frontline services.

20. Ben Houchen: Tories may need a pact with Reform to defeat Labour

The Tories may need to form a coalition with Reform to unite the right and keep Labour out of power at the next election, a Conservative mayor says.

The party faces losing hundreds of councillors in the local elections on Thursday and could even finish fourth in terms of vote share behind Reform, Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

The local elections will increase pressure on Kemi Badenoch, the Conservative leader, who has ruled out doing a deal with Nigel Farage, the leader of Reform UK.



Kemi Badenoch, the Conservative leader, has already ruled out doing a deal with Nigel Farage, the leader of Reform UKHOUSE OF COMMONS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Ben Houchen, the Tory mayor of Tees Valley, told the BBC: “If at the next election, there is a number of MPs from the Tory party and Reform that would create a significant majority, then obviously there’s going to be a conversation to create a coalition or a pact.

“I’m talking about the practicalities of keeping Labour out of government because we’ve seen what they’ve done in the past ten months.”

Badenoch ruled out a national pact with Farage but said that she was open to coalitions at a local level.

She told Trevor Phillips on Sky News: “I want to be extremely clear, because people have often been confused by this. I’m not going into any coalition whatsoever with Nigel Farage or Reform at national level.

“At local level, it’s different. In the national election, you can rerun the election, at local level you can’t.

“So there might be no overall control. And what I’ve said to our councillors — I trust these people, they’re very smart, they’ve been doing this for decades — is that you have to do what is right for your local area. At the moment, we are in coalition with Liberal Democrats, with Independents, we’ve been in coalition with Labour before at local government level. They have to look at who the people are that they’re going into coalition with and seeing how they can deliver for local people.”



Badenoch ruled out a national pact with Farage, above, but said that she was open to coalitions at a local levelLEE MCLEAN

Sir John Curtice, the polling expert, said the Tories faced being “decimated” in the local elections and that Reform posed an “existential” threat.

He said: “Reform are picking up a deeply disappointed, pro-Brexit electorate. When you look at the attitudes of Reform supporters, they are more critical of the Tories than Labour supporters and more critical of Labour than Tory supporters. They are deeply discontented. Farage’s great ability is he can articulate people’s grievances. He can do all those things that Starmer and Badenoch and Davey are useless at. He is a charismatic, effective politician.”

Badenoch said she was not worried that Bassim Haidar, a Conservative Party donor who announced he was giving £1 million to Reform, could be the first of many. It was reported that Haidar donated

£700,000 to the Conservative Party under Rishi Sunak and has now announced he is giving £1 million to Reform.

Badenoch said: “The last release showed that we raised more than the Lib Dems, Reform and Labour combined. So we’re doing fine on donations. Obviously we don’t want to lose our donors, but we need to make sure that what we are doing is about the public, it’s not just about winning elections. What are we winning for? What is the agenda?”



Sir John Curtice, the polling expert, said Reform are picking up votes from a deeply disappointed, still pro-Brexit electorateALAMY

Voters in 23 local authorities in England go to the polls this week. Mayors are also up for election in six regions.

It emerged at the weekend that the Conservative Party’s director of strategy went on holiday to the Himalayas in the run-up to the local elections. Baroness Maclean of Redditch said she took an Easter holiday that was booked before last year’s general election. She is now back in the UK.

21. Tony Blair ‘stopped Angela Rayner quitting over housing target’

Angela Rayner threatened to resign from the cabinet over the “impossible” target of building 1.5 million homes in the next five years, an updated biography of Sir Keir Starmer has claimed.

The claim, made by Lord Ashcroft in an updated version of Red Flag, alleges that Sir Tony Blair, the former prime minister, intervened and convinced the deputy prime minister to stay on in government.

Housebuilding experts have repeatedly warned that the government will fail in its flagship pledge to build 1.5 million homes — 300,000 a year — by the end of this parliament.



Lord AshcroftOLI SCARFF/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

In the book, Ashcroft said: “She is still prone to stirring up trouble... [on] one occasion she threatened to resign because she felt she’d been set the impossible target of Labour building 1.5 million new homes. It took a call from Tony Blair to talk her down — which, incidentally, tells you how important Blair is to the Starmer project.”

A source close to Rayner said: “We do not recognise the claims made. Angela is proud to be serving as deputy prime minister in Keir’s cabinet and delivering on Labour’s crystal-clear commitment to build 1.5 million homes as part of our plan for change.”

Last month the Office for Budget Responsibility, the fiscal watchdog, forecast that planning reforms would deliver 1.3 million homes by the end of this parliament. Rayner said this year that there were “no excuses” not to build the homes.

The book also claims that Starmer takes Prince, a rare breed of Siberian kitten worth £1,500 that the prime minister gave to his children last year, to Chequers, his grace-and-favour home, when he goes for the weekend, to protect him from Larry, the veteran mouser who lives in No 10.



Sir Keir Starmer and Prince in his office at 10 Downing Street in SeptemberSIMON DAWSON/10 DOWNING STREET

Larry is kept apart from Prince because of concerns that they will fight. The book says: “One source claims Prince is not allowed out of the Starmers’ Downing Street flat or else Larry, who can be aggressive, would eat him.”

22. Pat McFadden casts doubt on UK-US trade deal as EU beckons

A senior cabinet minister has cast doubt on whether Britain will secure a trade deal with the US amid mounting concern that President Trump’s tariffs will lead to job losses.

Pat McFadden, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, said that while an agreement was possible, “I don’t think it’s certain”. He said that the government would not rush into an agreement.

Ministers hope to secure a deal with the US by May 19, when Sir Keir Starmer hosts European leaders for a Lancaster House summit at which the UK will sign an agreement with Brussels on trade, agriculture, security and fishing.



President Trump meets with Starmer in the Oval Office in February. JIM WATSON/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

There are concerns that if a deal with the US is not reached by then, Trump could take offence at the UK's move towards closer alignment with the EU. Trump has previously said that the EU was created to "screw" the US.

Last week Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, said that she was confident of securing a deal on a visit to the US. She held talks with Scott Bessent, the US treasury secretary.

However, McFadden was more downbeat in his assessment. On Sky News's Sunday Morning with Trevor Phillips he said: "There's a serious level of engagement going on at high levels. We're taking it seriously. I think an agreement is possible. I don't think it's certain. I think it's possible. Far better to have the right agreement than to rush."

Reeves did not secure a breakthrough in her talks with Bessent. After the meeting the US government said simply that Bessent "noted the need for progress on fair and reciprocal trade between the US and the UK".

British officials believe that Trump will retain baseline tariffs of 10 per cent on all goods from Britain. They are attempting to secure a reduction in the 25 per cent tariffs on cars, steel and aluminium.

Britain has offered to reduce tariffs on imports of both cars and agricultural products from the US. However the government has drawn a red line over US demands for Britain to lift its ban on the import of chlorine-washed chicken and hormone injected beef.

The government is more optimistic about the forthcoming deal with the EU. Under the terms of agreement, British food and agricultural goods would be exported to the EU without the cumbersome paperwork and checks that have existed since Brexit.

A study last year found that British food exports to the bloc had fallen by nearly £3 billion a year since Brexit, and removing the checks was one of Starmer's key requests in the negotiations with the EU.

In return the UK will agree to follow existing and future EU food standards rules, something which would explicitly rule out a comprehensive free trade deal with the United States.

Ministers are also expected to concede French demands for EU fishing quotas to be maintained for at least two more years with the potential for a longer extension.

There will also be a defence and security pact that will allow UK defence companies to benefit from a €150 billion (£129 billion) Brussels re-armament loan fund under the bloc's Security Action for Europe (Safe) project.

The deal is expected to be accompanied by another document setting out potential co-operation in other areas that will include youth mobility, a plan to improve electricity trading between the UK and the EU and linking carbon emissions trading systems.

23. UK's economic confidence lower than in crash, Covid or winter of discontent

Confidence in Britain's economy has fallen to the lowest level ever recorded, below the global crash, Covid pandemic and winter of discontent, according to a poll.

The Ipsos Economic Optimism Index (EOI) has been recording net economic optimism in Britain since 1978.

According to the latest poll, carried out between April 2 and 8, 75 per cent of Britons expect the economy to get worse over the next 12 months and just 7 per cent think it will improve.

This equates to a net score of -68 points, taking into account the 13 per cent who think economic conditions will remain the same and the 5 per cent who don't know.

This is lower than levels seen during some of the most challenging economic periods in recent history, including the January 1980 recession under Margaret Thatcher after the 1978-79 winter of discontent (-64), the global financial crisis of July 2008 under Gordon Brown (-64), and the cost-of-living crisis triggered by the pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine in June 2022 (also -64).

It comes just days after the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said that President Trump's tariffs had unleashed a "major negative shock" into the world economy, and cut its forecasts for US, UK and global growth.

The IMF sees every major economy being hit; the UK is expected to grow 1.1 per cent this year, down from the 1.6 per cent predicted in January. It expects a sharper deterioration for the US, from 2.7 per cent to 1.8 per cent.

Rachel Reeves, the chancellor, met Scott Bessent, the US Treasury secretary, in Washington on Friday to discuss the prospects for a US-UK trade agreement. Britain is hoping to persuade Trump to relent on a 25 per cent tariff on UK car imports to America, which British manufacturers have warned could quickly lead to job losses if it is not lifted. It is unclear whether Washington is prepared to discuss exemptions from the 10 per cent base tariff it has imposed on all countries, including the UK.

Responding to the poll, Mel Stride, the shadow chancellor, said: "Labour have sent confidence in our economy through the floor at the worst possible time. The impact of their disastrous budget and talking down the economy is now being compounded by trade uncertainty. If people fear for the future, then businesses will not invest and consumers will not spend.

"The IMF's downgrade of the UK's growth forecast should be a wake-up call for Rachel Reeves. Her choices have left Britain under pressure. Higher inflation, weaker growth and collapsing confidence. Her high-tax, high-spend agenda is taking us back to the 1970s."



Mel Stride, the shadow chancellor BEN MONTGOMERY/GETTY IMAGES

Analysis of economic optimism nine months into the tenures of all the prime ministers who have served over the past 47 years reveals the present level is the lowest recorded at this stage in office. The previous lowest figure of -58 points was recorded in February 1980, nine months into Thatcher's tenure.

The negative outlook is reflected across all demographics, with only minor variations between age groups, social grades and genders. Men (-65) are slightly less negative than women (-71), and ABC1 social grades (-66) are marginally less pessimistic than C2DE grades (-72). People of all ages are also concerned, with pessimism increasing with age, at -59 points for those aged 18-34; -68 for 35-54 year-olds; and -75 for over 55s.

The survey of 1,010 UK adults reveals a worsening of the public mood since last month's poll, when 67 per cent thought the economy would get worse and 13 per cent better.

Gideon Skinner, senior director of UK politics at Ipsos, said: "We know Britons are feeling concerned about the impact of tariffs imposed by the US, and it's likely that this has had an impact in deteriorating economic confidence. However, even before then there was widespread anxiety among the public over the state of the economy. This adds up to a significant challenge for Labour, made harder by the concerns over the recent global economic situation, but also reflecting longer-standing public worries over the economy and their standards of living."

24. Home Office pleads to landlords for help housing migrants

The Home Office is appealing for landlords to house asylum seekers after a record number of small-boat arrivals this month, according to reports.

Landlords have been offered five-year guaranteed full rent deals to house migrants by Serco, a private contractor working for the government office.

The number of migrants who arrived in Britain after crossing the English Channel reached a record for the first four months of the year. Eleven small boats carrying a total of 656 people arrived on April 12, taking the total number of people crossing in 2025 to 8,064, according to provisional Home Office figures.

During the general election campaign last year, Sir Keir Starmer pledged to crack down on people-smuggling gangs. The prime minister has since conceded, however, that combating small-boat crossings had become “very challenging” in March, when arrivals were a third higher than during the same month last year.

A Serco event next month at a hotel in the Malvern Hills will seek to attract landlords, investors and agents with properties in the North West, the Midlands and the east of England. They must be able to offer leases of at least five years, The Telegraph reported.

Chris Philp, the shadow home secretary, told the paper: “This lays bare Labour’s shameful failures. Because they have let in record numbers of illegal immigrants so far this year, via Serco the government is offering better than market terms to landlords to house them.

“This is taking away homes that hard-working tax-paying Britons who are struggling to find a place to rent need.”

In response, a Labour source said the arrangement between the government and the private rental sector had been in place since 1999, including the past 14 years of Tory government.



The RNLI brings passengers ashore to Dover on April 8 after a boat got into difficulty GARETH FULLER/PA

A Home Office spokesman said: “We have a statutory duty to support destitute asylum seekers who will not be able to pay for fees such as utilities and council tax.

“We are restoring order to the asylum system and cutting costs to taxpayers by reducing the number of people we are required to accommodate through a rapid increase in asylum decision-making and the removal of more than 24,000 people with no right to be in the UK.”

More than 1,200 Eritreans crossed the Channel in the first three months of the year, more than migrants of any other nationality, official figures show. Citizens of the east African country have overtaken Afghans, who crossed in the largest numbers for the past two years. At least 800 people from Afghanistan have arrived so far this year.

25. Angela Rayner could force Trinity College to build new homes

Angela Rayner could force the ultra-wealthy Cambridge college attended by the King to build 2,600 new homes.

Trinity College has been accused of planning to “mothball” the 12-year development of the former Dunsfold Aerodrome in Surrey. There has been no building work evident for months on the land, which the college has also attempted to sell.

Campaigners have written to the housing secretary asking her to persuade Trinity, which has a £1.5 billion endowment, to kickstart the development at Dunsfold Park, one of the largest brownfield plots in the country.



An artist's impression of the proposed site

A spokesman for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) said: “We are clear that once planning permission has been granted, we expect those involved to build as quickly as possible so we can deliver the homes that people desperately need.”

A Whitehall source pointed to powers held by local authorities to issue a completion notice to developers demanding they complete their development. If they fail to do so, the planning permission for the development will lapse.

The source said of the Dunsfold plans: “It’s one of the largest housing sites in the country, it would be surprising if the housing secretary wasn’t keeping an eye on what’s happening. A completion notice or compulsory purchase order could be on the cards.”

The Hawker Harrier jet plane, nicknamed the widow-maker, was developed at Dunsfold. Top Gear and movies in the Star Wars and Batman franchises have been filmed there.



Dunsfold Aerodrome DAVID GODDARD/GETTY IMAGES



The actress Amber Heard is among celebrities to have raced around the aerodrome on Top Gear ALAMY

Waverley borough council and Surrey county council have supported building on the former airfield. Trinity's retreat now throws the future of the 625-acre site, worth around £120 million, into uncertainty.

Kevin Deanus, a Surrey county councillor, wrote to Rayner asking her to compel Trinity to build the homes.

"It's essential that wealthy landowners are not allowed to let large brownfield sites sit idle," he said.

“Trinity recently notified Waverley borough council that they intend to ‘mothball’ the site indefinitely and will not be actively pursuing development. This decision is disastrous for [the council] and leaves its five-year housing land supply in tatters.

“[Trinity] cannot be allowed to simply ‘landbank’ the site at the expense of the local community and greenfield sites across Surrey.”

Jeremy Hunt, the former chancellor, has also pushed for the project to be built.



TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER RICHARD POHLE

A spokesman for Hunt, whose constituency of Godalming & Ash encompasses the site, said: “I can confirm Jeremy has personally been in touch with Trinity and Dunsfold Park to see if there is any way of unblocking the impasse.

“He is trying to do what he can to help the situation.”

Trinity’s illustrious list of graduates includes Charles and two of his predecessors, a series of former prime ministers, Sir Isaac Newton, Lord Byron and Bertrand Russell.



Trinity College's chapel JUSTIN TALLIS/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

It is Cambridge's wealthiest college, with assets including the lease for the O2 Arena in southeast London, which it has also put up for sale.



MIKE KEMP/IN PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES

A new investment strategy spearheaded by Trinity's senior bursar Richard Turnill, a former global head of equities at Blackrock, is thought to be behind the Dunsfold decision, campaigners have said. Trinity, which recently bowed to pressure from Aborigines and returned four spears given to the college in 1770, is still sticking to its expensive target of reaching net zero by 2050 despite increasing scepticism that the deadline can be met.

Turnill said: “We know how much these new homes are needed and we have invested tens of millions of pounds cleaning the site from its historic pollution. We are committed to spending millions more on the clean-up to make it fit for development.

“We share the frustration of Waverley borough council and local residents at the delay, and we hope it can be resolved as quickly as possible so that hundreds of families can get new homes.”

Councillor Liz Townsend of Waverley borough council, said: “Dunsfold Park is the largest brownfield site in the borough and a key strategic location for much-needed new housing.

“While progress has taken longer than anticipated, we continue to collaborate closely with the developer and to encourage Trinity College to bring their vision to life.

“We look forward to seeing this new community take shape and providing much-needed homes and employment for our borough.”

A quarter of the houses and apartments were affordable homes aimed at first-time buyers. Others were to have locally affordable rents.

The MHCLG said it would respond to Deanus’s letter in due course.

A spokeswoman for Trinity College said: “We’re continuing to invest millions of pounds in cleaning up the site from its historic PFAS [perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances] contamination, which has to be completed before houses can be built, as well as resolving a contractual dispute that is delaying our progress.”

26. Keir Starmer refuses to confirm equality watchdog head will be reappointed

Sir Keir Starmer is refusing to commit to reappointing the head of the equalities watchdog who championed legal protections for biological women in same-sex spaces such as lavatories and NHS wards.

Baroness Falkner of Margravine, the chairwoman of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, has taken a pivotal role in the debate over trans rights and previously survived an attempt to remove her from office.

She faced criticism from a Labour minister last week after a landmark judgment by the Supreme Court that found trans women were not legally women. Falkner said that the judgment had brought clarity and meant trans women could no longer take part in women’s sport or be on single-sex wards, and changing rooms “must be based on biological sex”.



Sir Keir Starmer at prime minister's questions on Wednesday
HOUSE OF COMMONS/UK
PARLIAMENT/PA

Leaked WhatsApp messages showed that a Labour MP had described her comments as “pretty appalling”. Sir Chris Bryant, a culture minister, said that he agreed with the comment.

Starmer has said that he supports the Supreme Court's judgment and Downing Street subsequently clarified that he no longer believed that a trans woman was a woman. However, the prime minister is refusing to commit to extending Falkner's contract, which is due to end in December.

He was pressed at prime minister's questions by Kemi Badenoch, the Tory leader, over whether he would reappoint Falkner. She asked: “[Falkner] has had to put up with relentless abuse, not just from his front bench but from activists and ideologues. Reappointing her would be a clear sign that he is taking this issue seriously, so will he commit to reappointing Baroness Falkner when her term expires this year?”

Starmer did not respond directly. “I have always said that the debate should be conducted properly, on principle,” he said. “I have said it many, many times.”

On taking office, Labour considered replacing Falkner with Baroness Harman, a former Labour minister who oversaw the introduction of the Equality Act. However, it decided to grant Falkner a year-long extension.

Falkner previously survived an attempt to remove her from office after she faced an investigation into allegations of bullying and harassment, which were dropped. Allies said that she was subjected to a “witch-hunt”.

She has long been a proponent of changing the law to protect biological women. In April 2023 she wrote to the government suggesting that the Equality Act should be changed to introduce explicit protections for biological women in same-sex spaces.

Her position was in effect endorsed by the Supreme Court last week. The court ruled that the terms “woman” and “sex” in the 2010 Equality Act referred to biological sex, not acquired gender. The judges said that transgender women were not legally women. The ruling means that people who were born male can lawfully be excluded from women's sports, changing rooms, lavatories, women-only support groups and women-only shortlists.

The equalities watchdog has been inundated with calls from organisations seeking clarity on how to enforce the Supreme Court ruling.

Falkner said that public bodies may need to provide neutral “third spaces” to accommodate trans people.

In the leaked WhatsApp messages, Steve Race, the Labour MP for Exeter, was reported to have said that Falkner was “pretty appalling” in her interview, to which Bryant responded that he “agreed”.

Bryant said subsequently that he supported women-only spaces and the Equality Act and that his comments had been misrepresented.

On Thursday a Labour peer claimed that trans people were seeking asylum abroad fearing for their safety after the recent Supreme Court judgment. Speaking in a debate in the Lords, Lord Cashman said: “Currently, trans people in this country live in fear, they live in fear of their safety, their futures.

“Indeed, some friends are now looking at seeking asylum in countries where they will fear not [for their] safety but where they will receive a welcome.”

He did not, however, provide any evidence to support his claim.

27. Let in skilled Russians, UK urged — it'll undermine Putin

Sir Keir Starmer should increase the number of visas offered to liberal-minded Russians to encourage a “brain drain” from the country, a think tank has suggested.

The prime minister should aim to create “a pro-western Russian exile community” as part of a strategy of undermining President Putin, it argued.

The report by the Henry Jackson Society, *Russian Reality Check: How to Destabilise the Kremlin*, suggested that increasing the number of “high-potential individual” visas and student visas for Russians would “benefit the British government to the detriment of Russia”.

It said: “Such actions would drain Russia of its most talented professionals, while fostering a pro-western Russian exile community that could play a role in future political change.”

Britain should also strengthen its sanctions against Russia, it said, even if President Trump relaxes trade restrictions to force through a peace deal in Ukraine.

“With Trump potentially considering lifting sanctions in the future, European governments would see a reduction in sanctions’ effectiveness,” it said. “Yet the wrong solution would be to lift sanctions as well. The right combination of sanctions enforcement, asset seizures and financial disruption can still disrupt Russia’s economic resilience and send a signal of European resolve.”

The report said Europe retained “potent” leverage over Russia regardless of Trump’s efforts to broker a better relationship with Moscow. It said €258 billion of frozen Russian assets held in Belgium would go “some way” to financing the reconstruction of Ukraine.

“By legally repurposing these funds, Europe can both weaken Moscow’s economic stability and provide Kyiv with the resources necessary to resist and rebuild,” the report said. At the same time, it encouraged Europe to target oligarchs through the financial centres of London, Paris and Zurich.

The report also suggested the UK should “incentivise” defection by offering liberal-minded Russians sanctuary in the West. “The European Union and the UK should create relocation incentives for Russian business elites, skilled workers and technology specialists willing to abandon Putin’s system,” it said.

It also pointed to Russian opposition figures abroad and suggested that they be better resourced by the West. “Journalists, human rights activists, political figures and exiled former officials form a crucial counterweight to Kremlin propaganda, but they need institutional and financial support to remain effective,” the report says,

“European governments should expand programmes that offer political asylum and legal protections for Russian dissidents, ensuring that they are not targeted by Russian intelligence operations abroad, as seen in cases like the poisoning murder of Alexander Litvinenko and attempt on Sergei Skripal in the UK or the assassination of Zelimkhan Khangoshvili in Berlin.”

Dr Stephen Hall, the report’s author, said Russia was “exposed” and now was not the time to reopen dialogue with Moscow. “For too long, Britain and the West have indulged in the fiction that Putin can be reasoned with,” he said. “If we are serious about defeating authoritarianism, we must be equally serious about undermining it at its source.”

28. Rachel Reeves prepared to slash car and farm tariffs to seal US deal

Britain is prepared to slash tariffs on US cars and agricultural products such as beef and chicken to secure a trade deal.

Rachel Reeves said on Wednesday that she wanted to see trade barriers between the UK and the US reduced as part of negotiations with the Trump administration. Ministers are understood to be willing to reduce long-standing UK import tariffs of 10 per cent on cars and 12 per cent on agricultural products.

“I want to see tariff and non-tariff barriers reduced between the UK and the US,” Reeves told the BBC before a meeting on Thursday with Scott Bessent, President Trump’s most senior economic official. “I believe in free trade, but I also believe it needs to be fair trade ... That’s where the US do have an important point around some of the global imbalances that have built up over decades that we do need to address.”



Cadillacs may be cheaper if the UK reduces import taxes on American cars
RAYMOND BOYD/GETTY IMAGES

She ruled out giving in to American demands to lower import standards on chlorinated chicken, hormone-treated beef and US-built trucks. However, to persuade the US administration to reduce the 25 per cent levies imposed on British vehicles last month, the government is understood to be offering to reduce the UK’s import taxes, possibly down to 2.5 per cent — the amount previously charged by the US.

The move could reduce the cost of American-made vehicles such as Cadillacs, Jeeps and Chevrolets in the UK in return for reducing tariffs on exports such as Jaguars and Land Rovers. US car imports into the UK are worth about £1 billion, compared with £6.4 billion of car exports to America.

However, Andrew Bailey, the governor of the Bank of England, has said that a US trade deal would not save Britain from the wider fallout of Trump’s tariffs.

Speaking at a conference in Washington he said: “Fragmenting the world economy will be bad for growth. The UK’s a very open economy and therefore it’s not just the relationship between the US and the UK, it’s the relationship between the US, the UK and the rest of the world that matters here.”

But while signalling that the government was prepared to compromise on tariffs, Reeves insisted she was “not going to rush into a deal”.

“The most important thing for British jobs, British industry and our consumers is getting the right deal. And we’ll continue those discussions this week, including the meetings that I’ll be having with my US counterparts,” she said.

29. Robert Jenrick: Tories and Reform must unite to defeat Labour

Robert Jenrick has pledged to unite the right against Sir Keir Starmer, telling a private meeting the Tories and Reform must not be fighting each other for votes at the next election.

In comments that will be seen as opening the door for a pact with Nigel Farage, the shadow justice secretary said the “nightmare scenario” was the Conservatives going into the next election with the “two parties being disunited”.

He said he wanted to “bring this coalition together” and try “one way or another” to make sure divisions between Reform and the Tories did not hand a second term in office to Starmer in the process.



Kemi Badenoch, who has ruled out a pact with Reform, is coming under increasing pressure to sack her justice spokesman
TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER RICHARD POHLE

Jenrick’s comments, at a private meeting of Conservative students, were seized upon by Labour, which accused him of preparing to do “grubby deals with Reform behind the electorate’s back”.

Ministers challenged Kemi Badenoch to distance herself from Jenrick’s comments amid growing speculation about divisions at the top of the party over how to tackle the threat from Farage.

Speaking at University College London’s Conservative Society dinner late last month, Jenrick said Reform was doing “well in the polls” and he was worried they might become “a kind of permanent or semi-permanent fixture on the British political scene”.

“If that is the case — and I say I am trying to do everything I can to stop that being the case — then life becomes a lot harder for us, because the right is not united,” he said on a recording passed to Sky News. “And then you head towards the general election, where the nightmare scenario is that Keir Starmer sails in through the middle as a result of the two parties being disunited.



Jenrick was accused of plotting a “grubby deal” with Nigel Farage
FINNBARR WEBSTER/GETTY IMAGES

“I don’t know about you, but I’m not prepared for that to happen. I want the fight to be united. And so, one way or another, I’m determined to do that and to bring this coalition together and make sure we unite as a nation as well.”

A source close to Jenrick told Sky News that the comments were not advocating any kind of formal pact or merger. “Rob’s comments are about voters and not parties,” she said. “He’s clear we have to put Reform out of business and make the Conservatives the natural home for all those on the right, rebuilding the coalition of voters we had in 2019 and can have again. But he’s under no illusions how difficult that is: we have to prove over time we’ve changed and can be trusted again.”

A spokesman for Badenoch said that she “agreed” with Jenrick that “we need to bring centre-right voters together”.

Starmer told MPs that Jenrick’s comments showed “Reform and the Tories were working together” to “cook up a joint manifesto” and that Badenoch was no longer in control of her party. He added that Conservative MPs no longer expected Badenoch to lead the party at the next election and that Jenrick was plotting to replace her and do a deal with Farage.

The Cabinet Office minister Ellie Reeves, who chairs the Labour Party, said Badenoch needed to “urgently come clean as to whether she backs her shadow justice secretary in doing grubby deals with Reform behind the electorate’s back, or if she will rule it out”.

“If she disagrees with Robert Jenrick, how can her leadership have any credibility whilst he remains in her shadow cabinet?” Reeves said.



Daisy Cooper said the Liberal Democrats could capitalise if the Tories moved to the right
MATT ALEXANDER/PA

Daisy Cooper, the deputy leader of the Liberal Democrats said: “Senior Conservatives are plotting a grubby election deal with Nigel Farage. Kemi Badenoch should sack Robert Jenrick now if she’s serious about ruling out a pact with Reform. Anything less would show she’s either too weak to sack him or that she agrees.

“It’s little wonder that former Conservative voters, appalled by the party lurching further to the right, are switching to the Liberal Democrats in their droves.”

30. Labour whips shut down discussion on WhatsApp groups after leaks

Labour whips have demanded official WhatsApp group chats be shut down after a succession of leaks revealing MPs’ discontent.

Groups that were previously forums for backbenchers to chat or ask questions about government announcements have had their discussion functions turned off.

Instead, the settings have been changed to “broadcast only” — leading some MPs to complain they are now effectively just used by ministers and their aides to “parrot the lines to take”.

Chat has been disabled in groups designed to support the Treasury and Home Office in recent weeks, which sources said came amid pressure from government whips.

Other forums which have had the settings changed include those for MPs interested in the work of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

In the groups, administrators said the decision had been taken “following requests”.

However, the move has been seen as a bid to stymie leaks, following rebellious MPs’ comments appearing in the media.

Earlier this month, The Times revealed MPs’ anger over the Home Office’s decision to let councils pare back local grooming gang inquiries. Ministers said it would enable local authorities to take a “flexible approach”, but MPs privately said they had been “besieged” by angry constituents, and criticised the handling of the announcement.

Over the weekend, another group chat of LGBT MPs featured on the front page of The Mail on Sunday, revealing plans to meet to discuss the Supreme Court's ruling on the legal definition of a woman amid concern about its impact on trans people.

Other leaks have laid bare the scale of anger at the government's decision not to permit compensation for the Waspi women.

The move to curtail discussion has fuelled frustration from some Labour backbenchers.

One said: "It's ridiculous that there's been an effort to clamp down on free speech amongst the PLP [parliamentary Labour Party]. These WhatsApp groups are vital for us to ask questions in the interests of reinforcing the government's positive messages." A second said: "It's just another way of getting us to parrot the 'lines to take'."

A third source, joking about Signal group chats used by figures in Donald's Trump administration, said: "At least the WhatsApp groups aren't being used to discuss war plans."

Supporters of the move said it was inevitable — and that MPs could still contact ministers' aides, known as parliamentary private secretaries, with specific questions on government policy.



Andrew Glynne was suspended from the party over messages he had sent on WhatsApp
JOEL GOODMAN/LNP

WhatsApp groups are increasingly used in Westminster. They include departmental support ones — run by ministers and their aides — and unofficial groupings, such as for women and LGBT MPs. Other political parties also use them to communicate with MPs.

They have also led to the downfall of some MPs. Earlier this year, Labour suspended the whip from Andrew Gwynne and Oliver Ryan over a group chat involving local politicians in Greater Manchester, which included sexist, racist and homophobic comments.

Supporters of group chats in Westminster say they enable quick decision-making, and are increasingly used as a political campaigning tool.

But splits within the Conservative party under Boris Johnson, Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak were often and easily laid bare by a stream of message leaks. The WhatsApps of Matt Hancock, the health secretary during the Covid-19 pandemic, were among them, providing an insight into the sometimes chaotic nature of discussions at the top of government.