



THE LOOKING GLASS

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This briefing rounds up developments from the UK over the past seven days that double as ready-made, up-to-date examples for A-level Sociology essays and short-answer questions. Each story is tagged to the AQA 7192 specification and paired with a note on the perspective, concept or debate it illustrates best.

EDUCATION



Lords debate finds a million young people not in education, training or work

4 SEPTEMBER 2026

This Friday, 4 September 2026, the House of Lords debates the government's response to its Social Mobility Policy Committee report, which found that a million young people in the UK are not in education, employment or training (NEET), a figure that has risen by more than half over the past five years.

The government's response, published on 24 July 2026, welcomed the committee's recommendations to expand local pilot schemes, extend financial support for university students from lower-income households, and improve how national and local government coordinate support for young people at risk of long-term unemployment.

Committee chair Baroness Manningham-Buller argued that "local partnerships will create job opportunities and remove some of the barriers to social mobility," pointing to outdated GCSE requirements and university maintenance loan thresholds, unchanged since 2008, as ongoing obstacles for disadvantaged students.

WHY IT'S A GOOD EXEMPLAR: The NEET statistic is directly usable evidence against functionalist claims (Parsons; Davis and Moore) that education operates as a meritocratic sorting mechanism rewarding ability and effort. It supports Marxist arguments, including Bowles and Gintis' correspondence principle (the idea that schooling mirrors and prepares pupils for an unequal workplace), that education reproduces existing class inequality rather than resolving it. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, the knowledge, tastes and qualifications better-off families pass on and schools reward, can help explain why disadvantage persists across generations. Strong AO2 material for essays on the role of education in reducing or reproducing inequality.

SPECIFICATION LINKS 3.1.1 (Education); also 3.2.8 (Stratification and Differentiation, where studied).



New Ofsted inspection framework takes effect as pupils return for the new school year

1 SEPTEMBER 2026

As pupils returned to school for the new academic year this week, a revised Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, the body that inspects schools in England) inspection framework came into effect, first announced in June 2026.

Under the new framework, inspectors compare a school's results against similar schools rather than only national averages, and judge leaders on whether disadvantaged pupils make progress "in line with the progress of non-disadvantaged pupils nationally." Schools must also publish a clear strategy for including pupils with additional needs.

The changes follow years of debate over whether Ofsted's previous headline judgements fairly captured a school's overall performance, particularly for schools serving disadvantaged areas.

WHY IT'S A GOOD EXEMPLAR: Ofsted inspection is a clear example of the New Right's emphasis on accountability, standards and parental choice (sometimes called parentocracy, the idea that a child's education depends on parental choice and wealth rather than ability) in education policy. Its focus on measurable outcomes can also be read through a functionalist lens as reinforcing shared standards of achievement. Critics argue that inspection regimes encourage performativity (Stephen Ball's term for a culture where staff work to be measured rather than simply to teach), useful for essays evaluating the impact of marketisation and managerialism on schools.

SPECIFICATION LINKS 3.1.1 (Education).

CRIME AND DEVIANCE



Government commits £110 million to new prison places amid overcrowding crisis

1 SEPTEMBER 2026

On 1 September 2026, the government announced £110 million in new funding to speed up the building of prison places in England and Wales. The money will convert spare offices and laundry rooms into cells and add to the 3,200 extra places already delivered over the past two years, including a new 1,700-place prison under contract in Lancashire.

The announcement follows criticism of an early release scheme, introduced to relieve overcrowding, which was due to free around 6,000 prisoners from October before the figure was cut to 5,000 after public anger over the scheduled early release of PC Andrew Harper's killers. A further 1,400 offenders, including those convicted of murder, manslaughter and rape, have now been excluded from qualifying. Justice Secretary Alex Norris called the building programme "the biggest since the Victorian era" (the period of Queen Victoria's reign, 1837 to 1901, when much of the current prison estate was first built).

Thames Valley Police Chief Constable Jason Hogg said forces had "not received any additional funding" to manage the extra work created by the changes, highlighting tension between prison policy and the wider resourcing of the criminal justice system.

WHY IT'S A GOOD EXEMPLAR: This story gives an up-to-date, factual example of the tension between punitive and rehabilitative approaches to punishment. It supports AO2 application in essays contrasting the New Right's 'prison works' stance, and functionalist ideas (Durkheim) that punishment reinforces society's shared values, with Marxist critiques arguing that the criminal justice system primarily manages and disciplines the working class rather than addressing the structural causes of crime. The disagreement between ministers and the police is also useful evidence for questions on the effectiveness of criminal justice policy.

SPECIFICATION LINKS 3.3.1 (Crime and Deviance).



MPs scrutinise the Domestic Abuse Act five years on

3 SEPTEMBER 2026

On 3 September 2026, a House of Commons committee questioned ministers from the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the Department for Education on the implementation of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, five years after it became law.

The Act introduced a statutory definition of domestic abuse covering physical violence, coercive and controlling behaviour (a pattern of acts used to make a victim dependent by isolating, exploiting or frightening them), and economic and psychological harm. It recognised children as victims of domestic abuse in their own right for the first time, created the independent role of Domestic Abuse Commissioner, and placed a duty on local authorities to fund safe accommodation.

A government review published in May 2026 found the Act had strengthened victim protection but identified continuing challenges, including inconsistent support across different agencies. Thursday's session examined how far these gaps have since been closed.

WHY IT'S A GOOD EXEMPLAR: This gives current, ministerial-level evidence for feminist perspectives on the family as a site of unequal power, rather than the harmonious institution assumed by functionalist theory (Parsons' 'warm bath' thesis, the idea that the family exists to relax and restore its members). Radical feminists such as Dobash and Dobash have long argued that domestic violence is rooted in patriarchal power within the home. The story also shows the state extending into the 'private sphere' of family life, a direct challenge to the public/private divide feminists have criticised. Good AO2 material for essays evaluating feminist critiques of the family, or the role of the state in family life.

SPECIFICATION LINKS 3.2.2 (Families and Households, where studied); also 3.3.1 (Crime and Deviance) for victims of crime.



Lords debate warns UK 'strikingly unprepared' for an ageing society

4 SEPTEMBER 2026

This Friday, 4 September 2026, the House of Lords debates a report by its Economic Affairs Committee, which concludes the UK is "strikingly unprepared" for an ageing population, facing rising costs and a shrinking working-age tax base.

The report projects that the UK's dependency ratio (the number of pensioners and children relative to every 100 working-age adults) will rise from 31 to 47 over the next 50 years. Fewer working-age taxpayers will need to fund pensions, healthcare and social care for a growing number of older people, at a time when the adult social care system is already under strain.

Committee chair Lord Wood of Anfield rejected simply raising the state pension age as a solution, arguing it "saves the government money, but increases pensioner poverty as many people have already stopped working by their sixties." He argued that helping people in their fifties and sixties to remain in paid work is the more viable long-term policy.

WHY IT'S A GOOD EXEMPLAR: Demographic change of this kind is central to explaining shifts in family structure and function. It supports application to debates about who should care for older relatives, the family, the state or the market, connecting to the New Right's emphasis on family responsibility and to the feminist observation that unpaid caring work for elderly relatives falls disproportionately on women (sometimes called the 'triple shift': paid work, domestic labour and emotional or caring work). Useful evidence for essays on the impact of demographic change on family diversity and social policy.

SPECIFICATION LINKS 3.2.2 (Families and Households, where studied); also 3.2.8 (Stratification and Differentiation, where studied) for stratification by age.



MPs question ministers on safeguarding of vulnerable benefit claimants

2 SEPTEMBER 2026

On 2 September 2026, the Work and Pensions Select Committee questioned the Social Security Minister as part of its ongoing inquiry into how the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) safeguards vulnerable benefit claimants.

The committee has previously called for a new legal duty requiring the DWP to safeguard claimants, describing existing protections as inconsistent. It recommended that people be automatically referred to specialist support where there are signs of serious risk, and that domestic abuse be recognised as a standalone category entitling claimants to extra support within Universal Credit.

Committee chair Debbie Abrahams MP has argued that continuing failures amount to “a self-evident failure of safeguarding in the system,” and pressed for safeguarding to be built into DWP policy and processes rather than treated as a separate add-on.

WHY IT'S A GOOD EXEMPLAR: A useful, up-to-date case study for evaluating explanations of poverty and the role of the welfare state. It can support New Right style arguments (Charles Murray) about administrative failure within a large welfare bureaucracy, and Marxist or feminist critiques that see the benefits system as stigmatising and inadequately responsive to claimants' real circumstances, particularly for women experiencing domestic abuse. Strong material for essays on the sociology of poverty and welfare policy.

SPECIFICATION LINKS 3.2.4 (Work, Poverty and Welfare, where studied).

IN OTHER NEWS

Shorter leads worth following up in your own reading and revision this week.

- **Cohabitation Rights Bill continues through the Lords** – a private member's bill offering unmarried couples new financial and inheritance protections is a useful update for essays on family diversity and the legal recognition of cohabitation.
- **Small boat Channel crossings pass 33,000 for the year** – the House of Commons Library's latest figures, covering the year to June 2026, are a reliable statistical source for essays on migration and globalisation.
- **Church of England attendance grows for a fifth consecutive year** – rising, rather than falling, attendance figures are a useful complication for students weighing up the strength of the secularisation thesis.
- **Cambridge researchers launch a two-year study of a teenage 'social media curfew'** – a large-scale trial restricting app use for thousands of Bradford pupils is worth following for anyone researching media effects on young people's wellbeing and identity.



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SOURCES

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