



THE LOOKING GLASS

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This briefing rounds up developments from the UK over the past fortnight 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. This issue runs slightly wider than usual, back to 10 September 2026, because the days immediately before publication were thin for fresh, safe material across several departments.

EDUCATION



Head teachers' union calls for a pause on graded Ofsted inspections

21 SEPTEMBER 2026

The National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), a professional association representing school leaders, has called on Ofsted (the Office for Standards in Education, the body that inspects state schools in England) to suspend its system of graded inspections. NAHT general secretary Paul Whiteman said the current framework “poses a real and present danger to the well-being and mental health of school leaders and teachers, possibly even a risk to life.”

The dispute centres on Ofsted's report card system, introduced a year ago to replace single-word judgements such as “Outstanding” or “Inadequate” with colour-coded grades across several areas of school performance. Ofsted has defended the change, saying it exists “to raise standards for children and to provide clear reporting to parents,” and has said it will keep grading schools despite the union's objections. Education Secretary Lucy Powell has acknowledged the importance of leaders' wellbeing and promised to review the wider culture of accountability in schools.

The disagreement highlights a long-running tension in the sociology of education between the drive for measurable, comparable standards and the pressure this places on the adults who work within the system.

WHY IT'S A GOOD EXEMPLAR: A strong illustration of the tension between functionalist arguments for external inspection, that it maintains standards and public accountability, and Marxist or labelling-influenced critiques that treat managerial surveillance as a form of social control that can harm those it monitors. It supports an AO2 application point on the hidden curriculum of performativity, or an evaluation of the marketisation of education (league tables, parental choice) introduced by the Education Reform Act 1988 and extended since.

SPECIFICATION LINKS *AQA 7192 3.1.1 (Education).*

MEDIA AND GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT



Private member's bill proposes Ofcom licensing for social media platforms

15 SEPTEMBER 2026

A backbench MP has introduced the Social Media Platforms (Ofcom Licensing) Bill to Parliament. It would require any social media platform available to UK users to hold a licence from Ofcom (the Office of Communications, the UK's media and telecoms regulator) or face criminal penalties, and it sets out six compliance conditions, including verifying user identity and promptly removing content flagged by the regulator.

As a private member's bill without government backing, commentators have described it as "more a declaration of intent than a serious attempt at legislating," and it is unlikely to become law in its current form. It nonetheless reflects a wider, recurring pattern: repeated legislative proposals to tighten control over platforms, following the Online Safety Act 2023, in response to continuing concern about children's exposure to harmful content online.

Even a bill that fails to pass can shape public debate by keeping an issue, here the regulation of social media, prominent in political and media discussion.

WHY IT'S A GOOD EXEMPLAR: A useful case study of the ongoing moral panic (Cohen) around children, young people and social media, and the difficulty regulators face in applying effective external control. It supports an AO2 example contrasting pluralist approaches to media regulation with Marxist or hegemonic arguments that concentrated private ownership already limits the diversity of content available, whatever new licensing rules are proposed.

SPECIFICATION LINKS *AQA 7192 3.2.7 (The Media, where studied).*



Record daily total for Channel crossings confirms a volatile year

24 SEPTEMBER 2026

The Home Office recorded 781 people arriving in the UK by small boat across the English Channel on Wednesday 24 September 2026, the highest single-day total of the year. The provisional total for 2026 reached 18,565 crossings, a figure the government says is 42% lower than the equivalent point in 2025 and the lowest summer total since 2020.

Two boats evaded interception by Border Force in the days immediately before this record, prompting Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood to call the uncontrolled landings "not acceptable" and order an urgent review. Political reaction split along familiar lines: the Conservative shadow home secretary Chris Philp argued the government's pledge to "smash the gangs" had proved "a farce," while Reform UK described the situation as an "invasion," language routinely used to frame migration in explicitly threatening terms.

How this story is reported, through record-breaking daily figures, combative language and competing political claims about the same underlying numbers, is worth examining alongside the statistics themselves.

WHY IT'S A GOOD EXEMPLAR: This pairs a structural, global issue (the push and pull factors behind international migration) with a clear illustration of moral panic theory and agenda-setting in how different outlets and politicians frame small boat crossings. It supports an evaluative point about newsworthiness (Galtung and Ruge's news values) in deciding which migration stories receive coverage, and how the same statistic can be used to support opposing political arguments.

SPECIFICATION LINKS *AQA 7192 3.2.6 (Global Development, where studied) and 3.2.7 (The Media, where studied). Check which Paper 2 options your cohort is taking before using this as a Global Development example.*

WORK, POVERTY AND WELFARE



Poll exposes a gap between support for the two-child benefit cap and understanding of its effects

10 SEPTEMBER 2026

Polling by YouGov found that 61% of Britons would support reintroducing the two-child limit on Universal Credit (a means-tested benefit that, until earlier in 2026, restricted extra payments to a family's first two children), against 24% opposed. Prime Minister Keir Starmer had called the cap's abolition his "proudest achievement," while the Conservatives have pledged to reintroduce it and redirect the savings towards defence spending.

The same polling exposed a striking gap in public understanding. Only 20% of respondents believed the cap had contributed to higher child poverty, while 37% thought it made no difference and 35% were unsure. Among those

who actively support reintroducing the cap, just 8% acknowledged any link to poverty at all, against 53% who saw no impact whatsoever.

When researchers explicitly told respondents about the poverty link, support for reintroducing the cap fell from 61% to 36%, suggesting that how a question is framed, and what information respondents hold, can shift attitudes considerably.

WHY IT'S A GOOD EXEMPLAR: An unusually clean, quotable illustration of the gap between public perceptions of poverty and structural explanations for it. It supports evaluating New Right arguments, which stress individual responsibility and the risk of a “dependency culture,” against social democratic or Marxist explanations that treat poverty as produced by policy choices. The framing effect is also a strong AO3 point about the limits of attitude surveys as a research method.

SPECIFICATION LINKS AQA 7192 3.2.4 (*Work, Poverty and Welfare, where studied*) and 3.1.2 (*Methods in Context, if used to discuss survey design*).

FAMILIES AND HOUSEHOLDS



Government consultation proposes new financial protections for cohabiting couples

1 SEPTEMBER 2026

A government consultation titled “A Fairer End to Relationships” set out proposals to give unmarried couples who live together, and who do not currently share the legal protections of marriage, new rights on separation. Under the proposals, cohabitants who have lived together for at least three years, or who share a child, would gain the right to make financial claims when a relationship ends, plus automatic inheritance rights equivalent to those of a spouse if a partner dies without a will.

The proposals respond to a significant demographic shift: cohabiting couples now make up close to a quarter of all couples living together in the UK, according to census data, yet family law dating from long before this shift still treats married and unmarried couples very differently. Any finalised reform would only take effect “when parliamentary time allows,” meaning implementation is not guaranteed in the short term.

The debate over cohabitation rights sits at the centre of long-running sociological arguments about whether family law should adapt to how people actually live, or continue to privilege marriage as an institution above other family forms.

WHY IT'S A GOOD EXEMPLAR: A strong, current illustration of the New Right’s defence of the traditional nuclear family and marriage as uniquely stabilising, set against feminist and postmodernist arguments that diverse, freely chosen family forms deserve equal legal recognition. It also supports Giddens’ concept of the “pure relationship,” sustained by choice rather than external obligation, and offers a specific, dateable example of the state responding to family diversity through policy.

SPECIFICATION LINKS AQA 7192 3.2.2 (*Families and Households, where studied*).

CRIME AND DEVIANCE



Metropolitan Police to expand live facial recognition across London’s West End

3 SEPTEMBER 2026

The Metropolitan Police announced plans to install permanent live facial recognition cameras across London’s West End and Soho by the end of 2026, attached to street furniture rather than mounted on vans as in earlier trials. Commissioner Sir Mark Rowley called the move “the most significant expansion of the technology since it first arrived in the capital,” following a six-month pilot in Croydon that led to 173 arrests across 24 operations.

The cameras check faces against a rolling watchlist of around 17,000 people, built mainly from custody images and deleted within 24 hours of use. Campaign group Big Brother Watch criticised the rollout as premature, noting that dedicated legislation to regulate police use of facial recognition is not expected until autumn 2026, and that biometrics commissioners have warned comprehensive regulation could be up to three years away.

The expansion raises a direct question about the balance between crime control and civil liberties in an increasingly monitored public realm.

WHY IT'S A GOOD EXEMPLAR: An excellent, concrete case for applying Foucault's concept of surveillance and the "panopticon" (a design that makes people behave as though constantly watched) to a real, current UK policing initiative. It equally supports a right realist argument that visible, technological crime control increases the certainty of detection and so deters offending, set against left realist and civil liberties concerns about disproportionate surveillance introduced before legislation exists to govern it.

SPECIFICATION LINKS AQA 7192 3.3.1 (Crime and Deviance) and 3.3.2 (Theory and Methods, if used to discuss consensus versus conflict views of social control).

IN OTHER NEWS

Shorter items worth your own further reading this week, each a launchpad rather than a finished example.

- **Disadvantage gap in primary school attainment widens:** New provisional Key Stage 2 data shows the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers growing again after two years of narrowing, a live update to the education inequality debate worth following up.
- **Latest NEET figures published:** The Office for National Statistics has released fresh quarterly data on young people not in education, employment or training, a standard indicator in debates on youth transitions and social exclusion.
- **Falling religious attendance among younger adults confirmed again:** Further analysis of British Social Attitudes data shows churchgoing continuing to decline among under-35s, useful current evidence for the secularisation debate in Beliefs in Society.
- **Zero-hours contract reforms move closer to implementation:** Guidance on new Employment Rights Act restrictions on "one-sided flexibility" in shift work continues to be published, relevant to debates on precarious work and the underclass thesis.
- **Rough sleeping in England reaches a new recorded high:** Campaigners have again flagged record levels of visible homelessness, a stark structural indicator worth setting alongside this issue's welfare and poverty story.



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