



UK Alert: Increasing restrictions on civic freedoms

In the last nine months, the United Kingdom has seen increasing restrictions on civic freedoms, targeting pro-Palestine activists, migrants and transgender people, among others. Reports highlight disproportionate measures taken by police, racial profiling at protests, aggressive policing tactics, and controversial legislative changes targeting demonstrators, particularly those supporting Palestine. The Conservative government, which lost the 4 July election, introduced the Rwanda Safety Bill to declare Rwanda a safe country for relocating migrants, despite the UK Supreme Court ruling such transfers unlawful. Additionally, a new asylum partnership treaty was signed with Rwanda to facilitate these relocations. The new Labour government, which took office on 5 July, has promised to end the Rwanda scheme.

Transgender rights have been the subject of increasing public and political debate, particularly over access to single-sex spaces and services, and public opinion has shifted significantly regarding the ability of individuals to change their sex on birth certificates. Meanwhile, a series of legal rulings have reshaped the environmental justice landscape: a dismissal of contempt charges against Trudi Warner for protesting climate trial restrictions, a High Court judgment critiquing the Carbon Budget Delivery Plan, and a Supreme Court decision mandating climate impact assessments for fossil fuel projects.

In 2023, the CIVICUS Monitor [downgraded](#) the UK's civic space rating from "narrowed" to "obstructed". Reflecting on the situation prior to the elections, Ruth Ehrlich, Liberty's Head of Policy and Campaigns, emphasised the significant damage inflicted on human rights over the past 5 years and expressed concerns about a landscape of diminished rights.

This update provides a non-exhaustive summary of concerning developments in recent months.

Freedom of peaceful assembly

Excessive use of police force and repressions on pro-Palestine protests

Over the past ten months, numerous restrictions on freedom of peaceful assembly have been reported. These include police violence and excessive force.

One incident took place following a pro-Palestine demonstration on 11 November, at which [Marieha Hussain](#) held a placard depicting former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and former Home Secretary Suella Braverman as coconuts. As explained by journalist Aina Khan, "coconut is a divisive term which, as it is brown outside and white inside, suggests a Black or brown individual is akin to a traitor who has betrayed their heritage by indulging white opinion." Hussain was charged for racially aggravated public order offence by London's Metropolitan Police, who claimed that the term "coconut" constitutes hate speech. Hussain contended that the charge misinterpreted the term and targeted her due to her ethnic and religious background. In a [video](#) shared by CAGE International, Hussain revealed that she underwent an abusive police interview and was subsequently harassed by police and forced to leave her house during the night. On 26 June, Marieha Hussain [appeared](#) in Westminster Magistrates' Court where the Metropolitan Police [arrested](#) five CAGE International staff members protesting with coconut signs for racially aggravated public order offences and seized coconuts from the scene; the five individuals were later released without charges. A spokesperson for CAGE International [commented](#) that it was a "sad day for democracy and freedom of speech if activists can be arrested for holding a sign and pieces of fruit". The court [set a two-day trial](#) to begin on 12 September.

On 10 February, Greater Manchester Police reportedly [assaulted](#) independent legal observers monitoring an anti-fascist protest against a far-right rally at the University of Manchester. Despite wearing distinctive orange bibs, observers were subjected to violence, captured on video, illustrating broader concerns over police treatment of legal monitors during public demonstrations. On 23 February, the Metropolitan Police [faced criticism](#) for their handling of a protest against a conversion therapy conference at the Royal College of General Practitioners in London. Trans rights activists and anti-fascists encountered aggressive police tactics, including the controversial use of live facial recognition technology and PAVA spray (similar to pepper spray). Eyewitnesses documented instances of excessive force and racial targeting, prompting outcry from civil society organisations advocating for trans rights and for peaceful assembly.

On 2 May, forty-five individuals were arrested following [clashes between protesters and police](#) during a demonstration in south London against the planned transfer of asylum seekers to the Bibby Stockholm barge in Dorset. The protest involved blocking a coach intended to transport asylum seekers, with activists saying that the barge was unsuitable for housing and highlighting the community ties many of the individuals had developed in Peckham. The Home Office defended its decision to relocate asylum seekers based on cost reduction efforts and stated that accommodation allocations were non-negotiable.

In addition, the Network for Police Monitoring (Netpol) ["In Our Millions" report](#), released on 30 May, revealed concerning patterns of policing of the many pro-Palestine demonstrations that have taken place since October. The report, which details incidents up to 31 March, documents disproportionate police responses characterised by racial profiling and Islamophobia and driven



by politicians and media furore. It questioned the necessity and proportionality of increased police measures during public demonstrations, raising concerns about the impact on the right to peaceful protest and freedom of expression.

The report highlights police surveillance tactics, arrests following posts on social media, kettling and police harassment against children and legal observers, among others. “[I]nstead of seeing these protests as an expression of our fundamental rights to make our voices heard in a democratic society,” [commented](#) Kevin Blowe, Campaigns Coordinator at Netpol, “the government has treated those involved as a nuisance to crack down on, and piled pressure on the police to respond increasingly violently. The result, detailed in this report, has been confused and inconsistent policing relying heavily on racial profiling and Islamophobia. We’ve seen children as young as ten targeted, and people in their seventies injured by the police.”

Notably, the report found that in multiple instances, police compelled protestors, especially people from racialised communities, to remove face coverings worn to conceal their identity under the [Criminal Justice and Public Order Act \(1994\)](#) (Criminal Justice Bill). According to the OHCHR [General Comment No. 37](#) on the right to peaceful assembly, protest participants are allowed to cover their faces with masks or hoods.

[UK universities](#) have become focal points for [student-led protests](#) calling for a divestment from companies allegedly providing arms to Israel or involved in illegal settlement activities, and for a shift towards non-military research. At the London School of Economics (LSE), students established an encampment at the Marshall Building on 14 May. The encampment [was dismantled](#) on 17 June, after the group of student protestors were ordered to leave the university premises, following a legal case initiated by LSE. In addition, University of Sheffield students conducted a [12-hour sit-in](#) at the Diamond engineering building on Nakba Day (15 May), marking the 76th anniversary of the Palestinian displacement in 1948. Meanwhile, Trinity College Cambridge faced pressure to divest from such companies, reportedly influenced by campaigns by the International Centre of Justice for Palestinians (ICJP) and the students, although Trinity denies this action. Organisations such as [Amnesty International UK](#) and [the ICJP](#) support these movements, viewing them as crucial steps towards ethical and responsible investment, and accountability in educational institutions.

British universities have been accused of collaborating with police to monitor and potentially criminalise students during pro-Palestine protests. An [investigation](#) by Liberty Investigates and Metro.co.uk, published on 2 July, found that universities shared protesters' data with police without requests, and expressed concerns about the number of foreign students involved. For example, on 19 November police visited a University of York student at home due to a social media post supporting Palestine. Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to over 140 universities revealed that some institutions had close relationships with police, sharing information and monitoring protests, while others either denied or did not respond to the requests. This raises concerns about freedom of expression, the right to privacy and potential racial discrimination, with critics arguing that universities are compromising students' freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

The investigation also highlighted several [specific incidents](#): at the University of East Anglia (UEA), police advised against flying the Palestinian flag on campus, and the university monitored protests closely. At other institutions, police were involved in monitoring planned protests and encampments, and some universities, like Cranfield, referred students to the Prevent counter-terrorism program. Critics, including Netpol and the University and College Union, have condemned the universities' actions as disturbing and a failure to protect students from harm.



Legislative responses by the government

On 8 February, the government announced new [proposed](#) amendments to the [Criminal Justice Bill](#) to curb “dangerous disorder”, introducing measures that would ban face coverings as a response to pro-Palestine protests. The amendments would give the police new powers to arrest people who do not follow their orders to remove their face coverings. However, the proposed changes were set aside because of the dissolution of the Parliament, but former Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (Conservatives) [reintroduced](#) them in their manifesto launch on 11 June, promising to pass them if re-elected. With the new Labour government taking office on 5 July, the future of these proposals is unclear.

As a response to protests that took place outside MPs’ homes and other venues such as the Parliament or town halls, the government published the [Defending Democracy Policing Protocol](#) on 20 February. The protocol introduced new police measures and increased funding to protect democratic processes and the security of elected officials, by strictly regulating protests at MPs’ houses, political events or venues. “We simply cannot allow this pattern of increasingly violent and intimidatory behaviour which is, as far as anyone can see, intended to shut down free debate and stop elected representatives doing their job,” Rishi Sunak [said](#) on 28 April.

In an encouraging development, on 28 February the High Court [stated](#) that former Home Secretary Suella Braverman and the government had broken the law by using a statutory instrument to change the Public Order Act on 14 June 2023 (which was previously rejected by Parliament on 30 January 2023) to give police almost unlimited power to repress protests. The case was brought before court by human rights organisation Liberty, whose lawyer [commented](#) “The UK has the longest unbroken democracy in the world, but it rests on the separation of powers between the Government, Parliament and the courts. The Government’s actions are a flagrant breach of that separation of powers and cannot be allowed to go unchecked.” Liberty’s Ruth Ehrlich commented that Liberty challenged the threshold of “serious disruption”, as it was exceptionally low. She also said the government made no efforts to safeguard the freedoms of peaceful assembly and expression. Rowan Popplewell, Bond’s Policy Manager also criticised the former threshold, and she declared that case as an “important win for civic space”.

Moreover, the UK government’s independent adviser on political violence and disruption Lord Walney wrote to Rishi Sunak and Home Secretary James Cleverly suggesting [a ban](#) on MPs and councillors from engaging with groups such as the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC), or the environmental groups such as Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil. Liberty, Amnesty International UK and Friends of the Earth released a [statement](#) on 12 March condemning the ban and calling for the government to drop it, emphasising that the actions of PSC and similar groups are lawful, peaceful and crucial for guaranteeing civic freedoms.

On 14 March the government published a [new definition of extremism](#), shortly after Sunak [had said](#) that democracy was being targeted by extremists. The proposed definition broadens the scope of activities considered extremist and potentially includes peaceful protests and advocacy deemed critical of government policies.

As previously [reported](#) in our update to the CIVICUS Monitor, the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters Bill), commonly referred to as the Anti-Boycott Bill, was already identified in July 2023 as a significant issue affecting freedom of speech and democratic participation. As we also



[reported](#) in the update, CSOs have expressed concerns over its potential impacts, including constraints on fossil fuel divestment, restrictions on freedom of expression by prohibiting public bodies from making decisions based on moral or political objections to foreign states, and the exclusion of Palestinian perspectives during parliamentary hearings. Rowan Popplewell from Bond also stated that if the bill were to be passed, it would raise serious concerns for individuals advocating for political causes, social justice and climate justice, as it would infringe upon the freedom of expression for activists and organisations. Despite opposition from trade unions and devolved governments in Scotland and Wales, the bill continued to progress, but was finally dropped in May 2024 due to Sunak's decision to call an election.

Human rights groups have [welcomed](#) the news, while Palestine Solidarity UK highlighted the significance of the [Right to Boycott campaign](#) they led, which included more than 70 CSOs to put pressure on the government. Oxford City Council and organisations such as Liberty had clearly [expressed](#) their opposition to the bill in February. At the first Global Anti-Apartheid conference on Palestine in South Africa on 10-12 May 2024, Sinn Fein's party's chair and Member of Northern Ireland Legislative Assembly (MLA) for South Antrim, Declan Kearney, [criticised](#) the Anti-Boycott Bill, emphasising that Sinn Fein views boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel as a justified and proportional action until a ceasefire is achieved, and the system of apartheid and occupation of the Palestinian people are ended.

In addition, following the extensive protests since October, the government considered proposals to charge organisers of pro-Palestine demonstrations for policing costs. These measures are part of the recommendations from [Lord Walney's review](#) on political violence and disruption, highlighting the substantial strain on police resources due to these demonstrations. Since October, [over £20 million](#) in policing costs have been spent because of the protests, with the Metropolitan Police alone spending £17 million by early December. The review suggests that organisers of "disruptive" protests should contribute to these costs, [drawing parallels](#) with how football clubs pay for policing around stadiums.

On 21 May, Lord Walney published a [report](#) titled "Protecting our Democracy from Coercion", as part of his review, containing 41 recommendations calling for the surveillance of protesters and criminalising peaceful protesters, among others. Home Secretary James Cleverly published a [statement](#) on the same day, emphasising that Walney's report revealed a "rising extremist trend". He stated that the government will look at the recommendations carefully before they decide, and "will consider his recommendation for greater responsibilities being put on the organisers of protests to limit disruption, and to allow the police to account for demands on their resource in setting conditions to ensure wider public safety in their jurisdictions beyond protests." Bond [expressed their condemnation](#), arguing that peaceful protest is a fundamental democratic right and should not be financially penalised. They commented that these measures could disproportionately impact smaller groups and restrict their ability to organise and express dissent.

Environmental justice protests and court judgments

Recent developments in the UK highlight significant challenges in environmental justice. In March 2023, Trudi Warner, a 69-year-old retired social worker, [faced contempt](#) of court charges for holding a placard outside Inner London Crown Court last year, just before a trial of Insulate Britain environmental activists. The placard which read "[J]urors have the absolute right to acquit a



defendant according to their conscience," aimed to attract attention to the increasing restrictions that were placed on defendants in climate trials, which prevent them from mentioning climate change as their motivation behind their actions. On 22 April 2024, Judge Pushpinder Saini [dismissed the case](#), stating that this prosecution had restricted her freedom of expression disproportionately and unlawfully. Solicitor General Robert Coutts, a senior government legal officer, sought [Court of Appeal's permission](#) to challenge the ruling that blocked their legal action against Warner.

On 3 May, the High Court delivered [a judgment](#), ruling against the government's Carbon Budget Delivery Plan, critiquing its reliance on speculative technologies and its risky nature. Campaign groups including Friends of the Earth and ClientEarth had initiated the legal action against the government last year, challenging the adequacy of governmental climate strategies.

On 21 May, the Court issued [a judgment](#) finding that the former Home Secretary Suella Braverman had not been given the power by the Parliament to act when she passed the anti-protest legislation in June 2023, broadening the meaning of "serious disruption" to the point that the police were allowed to restrict peaceful protests which were causing minimal disruption. Since the law was passed, hundreds of environmental activists were arrested, including Greta Thunberg. [Liberty](#) has called for the police to stop abusing its powers until the appeal of the government has been heard.

On 19 June, environmental protesters [were arrested](#) for spraying paint on Stonehenge, as seen in a video published by environmental group Just Stop Oil. The group called for the government to stop the extraction and burning of oil, gas and coal by 2030.

In a [landmark ruling](#) on 23 June, the Supreme Court found that climate impacts must be assessed in an environmental impact assessment (EIA) when approving fossil fuel projects. This decision followed a legal challenge led by climate activist Sarah Finch and the Weald Action Group against the approval of oil extraction near Gatwick Airport. After the judgment was delivered, [Finch said](#) "I hope the judgment is a tipping point and will make it much harder for any new oil and gas sector to be exploited both in the UK and in other countries with similar legislation. But there's already more than enough oil and gas and coal in production to wreck the climate, even if we stopped all new production today, so I just don't see us weaning ourselves off it fast enough." The court's decision sets a precedent in requiring comprehensive assessments of greenhouse gas emissions from such projects to mitigate environmental impacts. "This historic ruling is a watershed moment in the fight to stop further fossil fuel extraction projects in the UK and make the emissions cuts needed to meet crucial climate targets," Friends of the Earth lawyer Katie de Kauwe [commented](#).

Meanwhile, public engagement in environmental issues has intensified. On 22 June, thousands participated in a [march](#) through central London to advocate for wildlife conservation and climate action. Naturalists Chris Packham and Steve Backshall, and actress Emma Thompson gave speeches outside [Parliament Square](#), and performances took place. Demonstrators, supported by over 350 environmental groups including the RSPB and Friends of the Earth, highlighted concerns over governmental inaction regarding biodiversity loss and climate crises.



Freedom of association

New UK-Rwanda Asylum Partnership Treaty and the "Safety of Rwanda" Bill

Recent legislative actions by the UK Parliament, including the passing of the Safety of Rwanda Bill and the establishment of the UK-Rwanda Asylum Partnership Treaty, coupled with a UK Supreme Court ruling from the previous year, have attracted attention.

A previous [CIVICUS Monitor report](#) detailed the former government's approach to the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR), explaining how it was pushing for the UK to leave the ECHR so they could allow for a harsher approach to migration. On 15 November, the UK Supreme Court [ruled](#) that the government's plan to send migrants to Rwanda was unlawful due to risk of ill-treatment and refolement, highlighting Rwanda's track record of human rights violations. Following this, [Human Rights Watch called for](#) the government to drop its unlawful Rwanda bill. "This policy has made complete chaos of the UK's asylum system, and this shameful deal has simply exacerbated the mess," Sacha Deshmukh from [Amnesty UK commented](#).

As a [response](#) to the ruling, on 7 December, the government introduced a [new Safety of Rwanda Bill](#) in the parliament (Rwanda Bill) which would declare Rwanda a safe country for the purposes of relocating individuals. "Through this new landmark emergency legislation, we will control our borders, deter people taking perilous journeys across the Channel and end the continuous legal challenges filling our courts," then Prime Minister [Rishi Sunak said](#), while then Home Secretary James Cleverly signed a new asylum partnership treaty with Rwanda on 5 December. In an [interview with CIVICUS](#), Julia Tinsley-Kent, Policy and Strategic Communications Manager of the Migrants' Rights Network, explained the differences between this new treaty and its predecessor, highlighting that it is only "one component of the UK's increasingly hostile environment for migrants".

On 27 January, a [joint civic society statement](#) was published as the Rwanda Bill was about to reach the Second Reading in the House of Lords. The 270 signatories called on the government to not go ahead with the bill, arguing that it breaches human rights and gives ministers the [power to ignore](#) interim measures of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). These measures are an emergency tool for the ECtHR to temporarily halt an action where there is a risk of irreparable harm, until a full judgment is issued. On 1 March, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (UN OHCHR) [expressed concern](#) that the Rwanda Bill may violate the principle of non-refoulement and undermine judicial independence by deeming Rwanda as a safe country, potentially leading to human rights violations. They urged the UK to review the bill to align with international human rights obligations.

On 22 April, [UN experts raised the alarm](#) over the role of airlines and aviation authorities in facilitating potential unlawful removals to Rwanda under the new UK-Rwanda agreement. They stated that such actions could violate international human rights standards, specifically Article 3 of the ECHR, which prohibits torture and degrading treatment. They added that despite the UK Supreme Court ruling in November, the provisions within the Rwanda Bill could potentially enable these transfers and stressed the corporate responsibility of airlines and aviation authorities to respect human rights, calling on them to end complicity in these actions. On 23 April, following the [final approval](#) of the Rwanda Bill by the parliament, Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for



Refugees, and Volker Türk, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, both [voiced strong objections](#) to the government's proposed measures. They argued that the Rwanda Bill fails to adequately address the protection gaps highlighted by the UK Supreme Court. The legislation, if enacted, would restrict the UK courts' ability to scrutinise removal decisions, potentially leaving asylum-seekers with limited avenues for appeal and protection, despite facing significant risks.

A spokesperson for organisations that were protesting against the Bill [said](#): "We all deserve the chance to live a safe life, and to seek protection when we need it most. This shameful Bill trashes the constitution and international law whilst putting torture survivors and other refugees at risk of an unsafe future in Rwanda. No matter how many times the [former] Prime Minister says so, we know this is not the will of the people." On 25 June, [Rishi Sunak stated](#) that the flights to Rwanda would take off in July, adding that the only way to stop illegal migration is to "make sure that we make it clear to everyone who comes to our country illegally that you won't get to stay, you'll be removed."

On 5 July, his first full day as Prime Minister, Keir Starmer [confirmed the termination](#) of the costly and ineffective Rwanda deportation scheme, labelling it a "gimmick" that failed to deter illegal immigration and pledging to address illegal immigration through new measures.

Gender equality, abortion and transgender rights

The UK is witnessing significant legal, policy and societal changes regarding gender equality, women's rights and transgender rights.

Gender-based violence (GBV)

On 21 February 2024, UN Special Rapporteur Reem Alsalem published a [press release](#) underlining the severity of violence against women and girls in the UK, describing it as a "national threat." She highlighted disturbing statistics, such as the alarming frequency of one woman being killed by a man every three days, and the alarming levels of domestic violence affecting one in four women during their lifetime. Despite the UK's legal framework, including the Equality Act 2010, Alsalem pointed out significant gaps in implementation. She called for improved coordination among government agencies, increased funding for frontline services, and more comprehensive data collection to effectively monitor and address GBV.

Right to abortion

The issue of abortion in the UK remains contentious, particularly with recent legislative efforts and campaigns surrounding decriminalisation. Anti-abortion activists [have targeted](#) MPs who supported [amendments](#) to the Criminal Justice Bill aimed at halting prosecutions related to abortions in England and Wales. MPs such as Labour's Diana Johnson, Stella Creasy, and Conservative Caroline Nokes faced challenges from independent anti-abortion candidates in the general election, many of whom were coordinated by the [Vote Life campaign](#).

Stella Creasy, for instance, faced opposition from Ruth Rawlins in Walthamstow, with tensions rising to the extent that Creasy requested police presence at local debates due to previous harassment from anti-abortion protesters. Similarly, Diana Johnson, Labour's candidate for Hull North and Cottingham, has been targeted by Pauline Peachey, founder of the Centre for Bio-Ethical



Reform UK's (CBRUK) Post Abortion Support for Everyone project. On 28 November, Johnson had proposed [an amendment](#) to the Criminal Justice Bill to exempt women from prosecution under the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 and the Infant Life (Preservation) Act 1929 for ending their own pregnancies. Moreover, Caroline Nokes, who previously represented Romsey and Southampton North, faced opposition from Fennie Yap, an independent candidate who has compared abortion to genocide.

Currently, abortion in England and Wales requires approval from two doctors and must be performed within the first 24 weeks of pregnancy, according to the [1967 Abortion Act](#). Beyond this period, intentionally terminating a pregnancy is illegal under the [1861 Offences Against the Person Act](#), which can result in a life imprisonment sentence. Recent [data from the British Pregnancy Advisory Service \(BPAS\)](#) highlighted an increase in prosecutions related to illegal abortions, raising concerns about women's rights and healthcare.

In response, MPs like Diana Johnson have continued to [advocate for decriminalisation](#), while Stella Creasy [has continued](#) highlighting how outdated the 1981 Offences Against the Persons Act and arguing for reforms to safeguard women's reproductive rights and prevent further restrictions disguised as regulatory measures. Efforts to amend the Criminal Justice Bill to decriminalise abortion have garnered support among women's rights campaigners, such as the [Abortion is Healthcare campaign](#) organised by activist group Level Up, and among [doctors and academics](#). "There is real urgency to change the law to address a real surge in the number of cases of women being investigated," Dr Jonathan Lord, co-chair of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) abortion task force, [commented](#). Furthermore, on 22 January, the RCOG, alongside other healthcare bodies, issued [guidelines](#) stating that healthcare professionals are not legally obliged to involve the police following abortions or pregnancy loss unless safety concerns are present.

Gender identity and transgender rights

Public support for transgender individuals' ability to change their sex on birth certificates has significantly decreased. According to the [British Social Attitudes report](#), only 24% of people now support this right, down from 58% in 2016. Moreover, 47% of respondents believe that trans rights have gone too far, a notable increase from 33% in 2021.

In August, a group of female nurses [raised concerns](#) about sharing a changing room with a transgender woman at a National Health Services (NHS) Foundation Trust. The human resources (HR) department took no action after the nurses raised their concerns. They argued that the NHS Trust's policies which allow staff to use facilities aligning with their gender identity has led to discomfort and distress among the nurses.

According to [Christian Concern](#), a collective letter was signed by 26 nurses in March, describing their experiences, and sent to the Director of Workforce at the NHS Foundation Trust. It received no response, and the nurses were advised to attend training to become more inclusive. The NHS Trust [expressed](#) its commitment to providing an inclusive and respectful environment and is working on addressing the concerns raised. Following the letter, in May, eight nurses [sued](#) the NHS Trust for sexual harassment and sex discrimination, supported by the Christian Legal Centre. Cleo Madeleine from the transgender charity Gendered Intelligence [commented](#) that people have to be more accepting.



In an [interview](#) with BBC Radio 4 Today, Kemi Badenoch, then UK Minister for Women and Equalities, announced that a future Conservative government would redefine "sex" in the Equality Act 2010 to mean biological sex. She [emphasised](#) that the current law is being misinterpreted and, as a result, "being exploited by all sorts of activist organisations, most notably Stonewall for their own agenda." This move follows the Scottish Parliament's attempt to pass the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill, which was [blocked](#) by the UK government.

The Scottish Greens [have urged](#) the next UK government to allow Scotland's gender reforms and have described the block as a "disgraceful attack" on transgender rights. They argued that the blocking order issued by the Conservative government was a political stunt aimed at suppressing minority groups. The Scottish Conservatives defended the UK government's decision, highlighting their commitment to protecting women and girls.

Ahead of the 2024 general election, both Labour and the Conservative party outlined their [positions on transgender rights](#), with significant differences. Labour's policy, as stated by then shadow health secretary Wes Streeting, aimed to modernise and reform gender laws to allow transgender people to "live their lives with freedom, dignity, and respect." The party intends to simplify the process for obtaining a Gender Recognition Certificate by removing some of the current requirements while retaining important safeguards. However, on 2 July, Labour's [Keir Starmer stated](#) that trans women with male genitalia should not be allowed to enter women-only spaces, as a response to Harry Potter author JK Rowling saying she would "struggle to support" Labour in the elections, highlighting internal party disagreements. Rowling, who was a former Labour member, [agreed to meet](#) with the party's candidates, such as Rachel Reeves who [said](#) she will "give her assurances".

The Conservatives argued that they would [change](#) the definition of sex in the Equality Act to mean "biological sex," allowing single-sex services and spaces to legally ban transgender individuals from using them. Women and equalities minister Kemi Badenoch stated that protecting women and girls' spaces is essential to avoid confusion about the law on sex and gender. Both parties committed to implementing the recommendations of the Cass Review on gender identity services for children and young people. The review discourages social gender transition before age 18 and recommends withdrawing puberty blockers from medical practice.

Workers' rights

In June, labour unions such as Unison [advocated](#) for transformative changes in work arrangements, notably pushing for a national shift to a four-day work week without reduced pay. This proposal, supported by over 1.3 million members of Unison, reflects broader societal shifts towards work-life balance and the potential benefits of reduced working hours, evidenced by trials showing increased productivity and reduced sick leave. Julian Jessop of the Institute of Economic Affairs has expressed scepticism, particularly regarding feasibility in essential public services.

The long-running pay dispute between junior doctors and the government has continued. Junior doctors [had announced](#) a strike and a five-day walkout in June, amidst election campaigns, which they were urged to halt. The strike has prompted [calls from health leaders](#), such as the NHS Confederation, for the new government to renew negotiations to mitigate disruptions and address long-standing grievances over pay and working conditions. Matthew Taylor of the NHS Confederation emphasised the disruptive impact of strikes on patient care and urged political



parties to pledge to reopen negotiations promptly. "We made clear to the government that we would strike unless discussions ended in a credible pay offer. "For more than 18 months we have been asking Rishi Sunak to put forward proposals to restore the pay junior doctors have lost over the past 15 years," British Medical Association (BMA) junior doctors committee co-chairs Dr Robert Laurensen and Dr Vivek Trivedi [commented](#).

In June, Tata Steel workers [announced](#) unprecedented indefinite strikes to begin in July in response to proposed job cuts and facility closures. This action, supported by Unite, reflects an escalation in labour disputes as well as broader concerns over economic restructuring and community impact.

Other social rights developments

On 18 March, [the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities discussed](#) the UK's progress on disability rights. Alexandra Gowlland from the UK's Disability Unit highlighted the government's commitment, citing the Equality Act, Disability Discrimination Act, and recent laws like the British Sign Language Act 2022 and Down Syndrome Act 2022. However, they also expressed their concerns regarding the measures taken. Committee Experts Rosemary Kayess and Laverne Jacobs noted a decline in standards since 2017 despite recent investments in social care. They pointed out that benefits were insufficient, leading many disabled people in the UK to live in poverty, with some even turning to suicide due to inadequate living standards and social protection. The experts emphasised the need for better national consistency, active consultation with disabled persons, and immediate redress for those harmed by the benefits system.

Moreover, schools across the UK have encountered challenges in accommodating and integrating refugee children into their educational environments. [Birchanger Church of England Primary School in Essex](#) has adapted by providing trauma-informed training for teachers through initiatives like the International Rescue Committee's healing classrooms program. This training equips educators to better support refugee children coping with traumatic experiences, fostering a more inclusive and welcoming school community.

Freedom of expression

Press freedom and SLAPPs

The UK government has responded to a [legal challenge](#) regarding confidential journalistic material under the Investigatory Powers Act 2016. Following a seven-year legal battle initiated by Liberty and supported by the National Union of Journalists, the government agreed to introduce safeguards requiring independent review before MI5 and MI6 can access and retain journalists' confidential material from bulk hacking data. Megan Goulding, a Liberty lawyer, commented: "This is a significant victory for the rights of journalists and the free press. For close to a decade, confidential journalist material has been spied on en-masse with few safeguards or protections for how that information is gathered or used."

Moreover, concerns over Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs) have prompted calls for amendments to the Anti-SLAPP Bill from over sixty experts, including journalists and



editors from prominent publications. On 11 April, they [signed a letter](#), coordinated by the UK Anti-SLAPP Coalition, which was sent to the Secretary of State for Justice, other ministers of the government, opposition policymakers and European institutions. They argued that current provisions could hinder free speech by allowing powerful entities to stifle public interest journalism through legal intimidation. “We are closer than ever to establishing a standalone anti-SLAPP law, but we cannot let its proximity stop us from ensuring the Bill does what it intends to: protecting public interest speech from being silenced by SLAPPs,” they wrote. They called for the government to support amendments to the Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation Bill.

In another significant development, Julian Assange, detained in UK’s high-security Belmarsh prison, was finally [released](#) in June, prompting reactions from Amnesty International and others. Amnesty International’s Secretary General, Agnès Callamard, [acknowledged](#) the release as a positive development after five years of imprisonment, underlining Assange’s right to freedom amidst ongoing concerns over press freedom violations. “Amnesty International embraces the positive news that Julian Assange has finally been released from UK state custody after five years of imprisonment, and that this ordeal is coming to an end for him and his family. We firmly believe that Julian Assange should never have been imprisoned in the first place and have continuously called for charges to be dropped,” she commented. However, Jameel Jaffer, executive director of the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, [stated](#) that “[A] plea deal would avert the worst-case scenario for press freedom, but this deal contemplates that Assange will have served five years in prison for activities that journalists engage in every day. [...] It will cast a long shadow over the most important kinds of journalism, not just in this country but around the world.”

