



The

INDEPENDENT

WEDNESDAY 20 MAY 2026

WWW.INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

SENIOR FIGURES ON LABOUR RIGHT TURN ON BURNHAM OVER BREXIT



Spying scandal sees Southampton kicked out of Championship play-off final



New trio unveiled as hosts of Strictly Come Dancing

Josh Widdicombe, Emma Willis and Johannes Radebe will replace Tess Daly and Claudia Winkleman on the show

Police investigate new child sex abuse claims linked to Epstein files

Detectives probe allegations of historic abuse in Surrey and Berkshire, weeks after release of files including FBI report into claims against Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor and sex trafficker Ghislaine Maxwell

HOLLY EVANS

British detectives are investigating two separate allegations of historic child sexual abuse following the release of files linked to the late paedophile Jeffrey Epstein.

Surrey Police are probing one report linked to locations in Surrey and Berkshire in the mid-1990s to 2000, and another linked to west Surrey in the mid-to-late 1980s. No arrests have been made. It comes after an FBI report from

July 2020, which appeared in Epstein files recently released by the US Department of Justice, alleged sexual abuse against Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor and convicted sex trafficker Ghislaine Maxwell in Surrey in the mid-1990s.



Editorials

Trump and Putin know Xi is key to ending their wars

During President Donald Trump's state visit to China a few days ago, President Xi Jinping burnished his intellectual credentials by citing the Thucydides Trap during talks with his counterpart.

He explained to the quite possibly bemused US leader how the Peloponnesian War in ancient Greece between two superpowers of the time, Athens and Sparta, arose from their inability to manage their respective interests, one being a nation in the ascendant unnecessarily provoking fear in the other. No prizes for guessing which role China thinks it is playing now. The exposition carried an unusually explicit warning about US-Chinese geopolitical rivalry: "Can we work together to address global challenges and bring more stability to the world?" More privately, and in the context of the future of Taiwan, President Xi left Mr Trump in no doubt about his meaning.

According to the "readout" in Beijing, Mr Xi stressed that if Taiwan is handled properly, the relationship can retain "overall stability. Otherwise, the two countries will have clashes and even conflicts, putting the entire relationship in great jeopardy." Mr Trump promptly put his \$11bn arms deal with Taiwan on hold while he consults Taipei; the trap was avoided, but not permanently.

President Xi will have no need to invoke the lessons of history to Vladimir Putin, who arrived in the Chinese capital almost as soon as Air Force One flew out. President Putin will be treated with at least as much respect as Mr Trump, and with rather more warmth: it is the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Sino-Russian Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation, after all. President Putin will be presented very much as an equal, and his country as a superpower, and that recognition of status will help Mr Putin with the television audience back home. There will be much talk of their "friendship without limits".

Nonetheless, there is no doubt about which is the senior partner in this relationship. Never before has there been such a power imbalance between Russia and China as there is today. Russia's economy, for example, is about the size of Italy's, while China's is comparable to that of the United States. Russia possesses a considerable war machine, yet, as the sorry history of the

“special military operation” in Ukraine has shown, it is not a particularly effective one.

Russia has been reduced to a supplier to China of commodities such as cereals, timber, oil and natural gas. Underlining the point, the establishment of a second trans-Siberian gas pipeline (an eastern equivalent of the now-defunct Nord Stream in Europe) is a principal objective of this summit. (One of the more unfortunate consequences of President Trump’s war of choice in Iran was to boost Russian oil and gas exports to China).

In return, China is a leader in AI, supplies Russia with advanced military and civilian technology, and bankrolls the Ukraine campaign. Without Chinese industrial, technological and financial support, the Russian economy would long since have collapsed.

President Putin knows this, and that his domestic situation is difficult, thanks to inflation and the never-ending war in Ukraine. He has lost key allies abroad, including Syria, Iran and Tehran’s militant proxies. On the other side of the negotiating table, President Xi is in his pomp, cultivating a Mao-style personality cult and extending Chinese influence and control of assets, notably critical minerals, across the globe via the Belt and Road Initiative and other such projects.

The geopolitical “optics” emanating from Beijing over the last week or so have thus confirmed that this is becoming China’s century, just as the last one was the US’s, and the 19th was one of British hegemony. As the world has seen over the last year, even the US cannot bully China over trade, and when Mr Trump launched his absurd tit-for-tat escalation of tariffs last year, Mr Xi matched them hike for hike, and reminded Mr Trump that “trade wars have no winner”, as American soy producers threatened with ruin last year would readily concur.

What remains of “the West” has still not worked out how to respond to a more assertive China. The People’s Republic has an appalling human rights record, oppresses its minorities and has betrayed the treaty guaranteeing the autonomy of Hong Kong. It spies on the West, and has been accused of neo-colonialism in Africa. Yet it cannot be ignored, and the question of Taiwan in particular is becoming increasingly dangerous. If Mr Putin can invade Ukraine, and Mr Trump intends to occupy Greenland – well, Mr Xi may wonder, what about Taiwan?

For the West, avoiding the Thucydides Trap is about much more than appeasing China; it is about forging a new realistic and pragmatic relationship that involves recognition of the legitimate Chinese aspiration for a peaceful reunification by consent of their nation. The challenge to China is to build a role in the world where it actively works for peace – and that means help in ending the conflicts in Iran and Ukraine.

China initiated neither but it too is suffering from their impacts, and has the power to help bring them to a close by pressuring Moscow and Tehran. There is a deal to be done with China, as previous American presidents have realised, because the US and Europe are vastly more important economic partners than Russia or Iran; but somehow such a vision seems to have eluded the author of *The Art of the Deal*. It’s unlikely Xi Jinping will ever

feel the urge to study passages from that particular contribution to civilisation.

[BACK TO TOP ▲](#)



Police investigate UK child abuse claims in Epstein files



Jeffrey Epstein died in a New York prison in 2019 (Florida Department of Law Enforcement)

HOLLY EVANS

Surrey Police are investigating two separate allegations of historic child sexual abuse following the release of files linked to the late paedophile Jeffrey Epstein.

The force said the inquiry related to one report linked to locations in Surrey and Berkshire in the mid-1990s to 2000, while the other related to west Surrey in the mid-to-late 1980s. No arrests have been made.

The latest investigation comes after Surrey Police called for witnesses to come forward in February, after a redacted report released by the US Department of Justice in December set out allegations of human trafficking and sexual assault, which allegedly took place in Virginia Water between 1994 and 1996.

An FBI report from July 2020, which appeared in the files, alleged sexual abuse against Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor and convicted sex trafficker Ghislaine Maxwell in Surrey in the mid-1990s.

The claims, made as part of an anonymous tip off to police, alleged that a woman was restrained on a table and “tortured with electrical shocks” by Maxwell, while the former prince and other men watched.

The force said they had found no evidence of the allegations being reported to them after reviewing their systems.

Confirming the new inquiry, the force said in a statement: “Following the release of files relating to Jeffrey Epstein by the US Department of Justice, we are investigating two separate allegations of non-recent child sexual abuse.



Maxwell and Epstein at Balmoral in 1999, guests of the-then Prince Andrew (US Justice Department)

“One report relates to locations in Surrey and Berkshire in the mid-1990s to 2000. The other relates to the mid-to-late 1980s in West Surrey.

“No arrests have been made. We take all reports of sexual offending seriously and will work to identify any reasonable lines of enquiry to verify information or establish corroborating evidence. There is no further information at this time.”

In a statement earlier this year, Surrey Police said: “Following the US Department of Justice Epstein file release in December 2025, Surrey Police became aware of a redacted report alleging non-recent human trafficking and sexual assaults on a minor in Virginia Water, Surrey between 1994-1996.

“After reviewing our systems using the limited information available to us, we found no evidence of these allegations being reported to Surrey Police. We therefore encourage anyone with information in relation to these allegations to report this to us online, or via 101.”

Multiple UK police forces have been reviewing information contained within the millions of pages of Epstein files released by the US Department of Justice earlier this year.

Surrey Police's inquiry follows separate investigations by Thames Valley Police and the Metropolitan Police, who have arrested Mr Mountbatten-Windsor and former US ambassador Peter Mandelson for alleged misconduct in public office.

In both cases, it was claimed that they had passed confidential government information to the disgraced financier. Both men deny any wrongdoing.

[BACK TO TOP ^](#)



Leaders of Blue Labour turn on Burnham over Brexit



Andy Burnham is now officially the Labour candidate for Makerfield (Reuters)

**DAVID MADDUX
ATHENA STAVROU
KATE DEVLIN**

Key figures in one of the Labour factions thought to be backing Andy Burnham to become Labour leader have instead thrown their support behind home secretary Shabana Mahmood, in a significant blow to the Greater Manchester mayor.

Mr Burnham was officially unveiled as the Labour candidate for the Makerfield by-election yesterday, along with his Reform UK opponent, local plumber Robert Kenyon.

But influential peer Lord Maurice Glasman, who founded the Blue Labour movement on the right of the party, and veteran MP Graham Stringer made it clear that they were not willing to back Mr Burnham following discussion over his support to rejoin the EU.

The comments, made at a conference celebrating a decade since the Brexit referendum, suggested that the coalition of support within Labour for Mr Burnham to replace Sir Keir Starmer as party leader and prime minister appeared to be fracturing.

The Greater Manchester mayor's supporters have already raised concerns about a dirty tricks campaign to prevent him from winning the by-election, with fingers pointed at allies of the prime minister and supporters of leadership hopeful Wes Streeting.

With Mr Streeting reopening the Brexit debate at the weekend with a call to rejoin the bloc as part of his own leadership pitch, focus has turned to Mr Burnham's comments in September in favour of rejoining even as he prepares to fight for a seat that voted heavily in favour of leaving the EU.



Keir Starmer polls far less favourably against Nigel Farage than Burnham (PA)

It also came as Darren Jones, the chief secretary to the prime minister, announced that the publication of the next tranche of papers on Peter Mandelson has been delayed by at least a month.

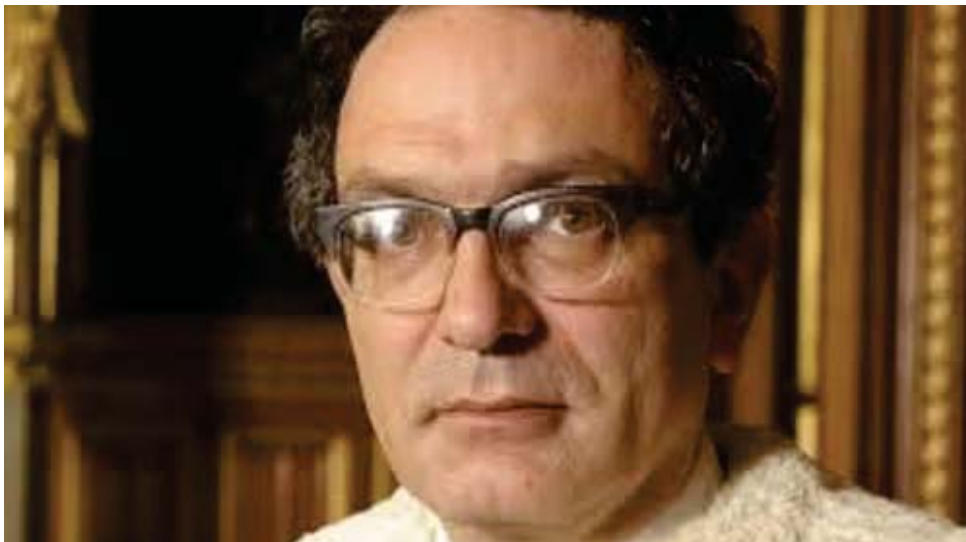
Last week, the Blue Labour movement, which supports Brexit, publicly thanked former Makerfield MP Josh Simons for stepping down to make way for Mr Burnham describing it as “a noble decision and the right one for our party and our country”.

And previously, Blue Labour chair Dan Carden condemned Sir Keir for blocking Mr Burnham from running in the Gorton and Denton by-election in February. But speaking at the Brexit Unleashed conference, Lord Glasman and Mr Stringer instead backed Ms Mahmood.

Lord Glasman said he has “no doubts” about wanting to see the home secretary Ms Mahmood lead the party. “I don’t think that that’s a futile hope,” he told the conference. “Let’s say Andy Burnham loses in Wigan and loses to Reform. I think that might concentrate the minds of Labour Party members quite clearly. So this is a fluid situation.”

He added: “The idea that our movement has produced a religious Muslim woman from Birmingham and Pakistani origin who’s a genuine patriot is actually a sign of great hope for us.”

Lord Glasman went on to say that he had been speaking to Blue Labour MP Jonathan Hinder about standing.



Maurice Glasman, founder of Blue Labour (Channel 4)

“If we don’t have someone telling the truth in this leadership campaign, we will drift further and further into the EU progressive fantasy world, and then come the election, we will be obliterated,” he said.

Mr Stringer said: “Of the three more or less named runners and riders, none of them appeal. Their policies I don’t think would be popular in the country, and if they’re popular in the Labour Party, that is a problem for the Labour Party. So I’m hoping Shabana or somebody else will come forward who will actually approach the real issues before this country.”

But in a boost for Mr Burnham, research by pollsters More in Common found that he is the best placed leadership hopeful to take on Nigel Farage.

In a straight head-to-head, Mr Burnham, beat Mr Farage by 14 percentage points, Luke Tryl from More in Common said. The Greater Manchester mayor also performed about 10 points better than Sir Keir Starmer against Mr Farage.

In a briefing on this month’s local election results, Mr Tryl said: “This is a hypothetical. One thing always to remember is, you know, when people go outside of Westminster, they tend to do better. But he performs about 10 points better than the prime minister against Farage.”

He added that a “Burnham bounce”, based on the Greater Manchester mayor’s personal popularity, was worth an estimated 20 points in the polls, making him the “narrow” favourite to win the constituency in next month’s by-election.

However, Mr Tryl warned that what happened during the election campaign could affect that outcome. He said there was a “big question about Brexit, and how much does it hurt” candidates. And he emphasised the importance of what the current row within Labour signifies.

“If looking at rejoin is taken as a sign (by voters in Macclesfield) that people in Westminster and the Labour Party, in particular, have now decided to move on from the lessons of the 2016 vote... that is more dangerous,” he said.

Meanwhile, Robert Kenyon has been confirmed as Reform's candidate. He recently won a seat in the council elections where Reform swept the board in the Wigan area. He also came second in the 2024 general election, losing to Labour's Josh Simons by just 5,000 votes.

However, Reform has declined to answer questions over why the social media platform X has suspended Mr Kenyon's account.

Mr Farage and Treasury spokesman Robert Jenrick are due to be in Makerfield to introduce Mr Kenyon as the candidate today, with the announcement of a new economic policy focused on the cost of living.

[BACK TO TOP ^](#)



Khan warns Labour rebels against leadership contest



Mayor of London Sadiq Khan said Labour must show it will follow through on its promises (AFP/Getty)

NICOLE WOOTTON-CANE

Sir Sadiq Khan has thrown his weight behind Sir Keir Starmer, insisting now is “not the time” for a Labour leadership contest.

The Mayor of London admitted the results from this month’s local elections were “really bad” for his party and said they should be a “wake-up call” for the prime minister.

He warned that Labour must “change the pace of delivery” from now on to win voters back, as both Wes Streeting and Andy Burnham have signalled their intentions to challenge Sir Keir for the keys to No 10.

However, Sir Sadiq told *The Independent* he does not believe now is the time for a change in leadership and called on the prime minister to do more to show people the change they voted for in July 2024 is possible.

“I think the results on 7 May were really bad for Labour in London, Scotland, Wales, and across England,” he said. “But I also think they are bad for those communities that Labour were elected to serve, and it should be a wake-up call to the national party who are in government to respond.”

Following the devastating results, which saw Labour lose swathes of votes to Nigel Farage’s Reform UK, Sir Keir said the results were “tough” but vowed he would not walk away.

Just days later health secretary Mr Streeting resigned from the cabinet and Greater Manchester mayor Andy Burnham announced his intention to return to Westminster in what is likely to become the biggest challenge to Sir Keir’s authority yet.

Speaking to *The Independent* after opening a tech abuse conference in London, the London mayor said Sir Keir’s speech the day after the crushing elections was a “good start” but the government must make sure it “builds upon” the change it has started.

He said: “I’m not suddenly calling for a change of leader but it’s important the government builds upon that so people start seeing the change that was promised in July 2024.

“We’ve focused on helping families across the cost of living crisis, improved living standards of people across the country. We’ve got to address the concerns that people are raising whether that’s victims of violence against women and girls or the other issues that people care about. I’m hoping you’ll see a change in pace in delivery from the government from here on.”

Sir Sadiq had previously warned Labour faced an “existential threat” after the local election results.

At the time he failed to explicitly endorse Sir Keir, saying “many people who voted Labour at the last general election clearly feel angry, disappointed and let down”, with Londoners “frustrated with the slow pace of change”.

[BACK TO TOP ^](#)



Supermarkets urged by the Treasury to cap food prices



Chancellor Rachel Reeves says she wants to ease the cost of living crisis (AFP/Getty)

JANE DALTON

The Treasury is reportedly urging supermarkets to limit food price rises as officials fear the Iran war will push up bills for households already struggling with the cost of living crisis.

The policy, which would be voluntary, would apply to common items such as bread, eggs and milk, as reported by the *Financial Times*.

In return, it's expected the government would ease packaging regulations on supermarkets and potentially delay rule changes on healthy foods.

Millions of households across the UK are already being forced to skip meals and cut back on family visits as the cost of living crisis continues to bite.

Two-thirds of households (67 per cent) have altered their shopping or eating habits in the past month to reduce food expenditure, a survey last month showed.

But supermarket bosses branded the government's idea "desperate" and "mad" and compared it to failed policies of the 1970s.

One executive said: "They're so desperate to do something that's going to combat the cost of living, but this doesn't feel like the right way to be going about it."

They said with other costs rising, such as taxes, fuel and energy, the plan risked pushing up prices for shoppers overall.

Sources told the *Financial Times* that the Treasury wanted supermarkets to voluntarily limit the prices of everyday items including eggs, bread and milk.

The British Retail Consortium, which represents supermarkets, said the policy would "force retailers to sell goods at a loss" and dismissed the policy as "1970s-style price controls".

In Scotland, the Scottish National Party (SNP) has pledged a similar policy, which will require large supermarkets to limit the cost of up to 50 popular food items.

Sir Keir Starmer's government is under pressure to tackle the rising cost of living as food prices continue climbing across Britain and there are concerns of a knock-on economic impact from the US-Iran war.

Last month's poll showed 85 per cent of adults were now worried about soaring food prices – an increase from 83 per cent in February.

It found 15 per cent of households were going without certain foods, and one in 10 – equating to 3 million families – were skipping meals to manage their weekly budget.

The SNP has accused the Labour government of having “abandoned the ‘squeezed middle’” and urged chancellor Rachel Reeves to go “much further” to help struggling households.

Inflation eased last month, but household energy bills are forecast to jump from July when the regulator sets its next price cap.

A Treasury spokesperson said: “The chancellor has been clear we want to do more to help keep costs down for families, and will set out more detail in due course.”

[BACK TO TOP ^](#)



Rising joblessness will be bad news for whoever is PM



Economic woes could dominate the Makerfield by-election (Getty)

SEAN O'GRADY

Unemployment is up, which isn't good news for any government, but is particularly bad for one that promised economic growth as its first priority. The figure of 5 per cent of the workforce (ie those actively seeking work) for the first quarter is up from 4.5 per cent this time last year, and is probably on a rising trend. At the same time, wages are still

increasing at more than the official inflation target of 2 per cent, albeit rises are slowing. The number of vacancies is also down. The IMF has marginally upgraded its growth forecast for the UK this year – but only to 1 per cent.

Why is unemployment up?

Donald Trump's war in Iran, distant as it is, has already chastened business and economic confidence. An uptick in prices has sucked spending power out of the pockets of consumers, and hopes for cuts in interest rates this year have all but evaporated. Households and businesspeople are feeling more nervous about spending and investing, and the high cost of servicing the national debt, and the sheer size of it, is limiting the government's ability to make up the shortfall. Employers aren't hiring, and there is greater competition for jobs, which is having some effect on wage rises. Even so, overall, the trend in employment has actually been up – 416,000 more people in work than this time last year; that may not continue, depending on events abroad.

Who is suffering most?

As with the Covid-19 pandemic and the banking crash of 2008, it is younger workers, less qualified and less experienced, who are hit hardest. Thus, the youth unemployment rate has reached 14.7 per cent, its highest point since late 2014. It's difficult to disentangle these numbers, and probably still too early to say, but it is at least possible that the changes in employment law, plus increases in minimum wage rates and higher employers' national insurance contributions have played some role in depressing the job prospects for those entering the labour market. Youth unemployment is notably worse in northeast England, London and the East Midlands – with obvious political implications for "insurgent" parties.

What about wages?

Depending on how you count earnings, they are still up by 3 to 4 per cent on the year. But the Office for National Statistics points out that, when prices and the cost of housing are taken into account, the real rise in purchasing power for family budgets is

about 0.1 to 0.8 per cent over the past year – and with a worsening outlook in the short to medium term.

Put more simply, the cost of living crisis is far from over, will intensify, and inevitably the younger working poor, less protected against inflation than pensioners and those relying on benefits, will be hit hardest. It is fair to add that their circumstances will make them more likely to turn to protest parties and away from Labour. That will most likely remain the case whoever is prime minister in the coming months.

Does this mean stagflation?

It is certainly pointing in that direction. Over the past few years, inflation has been more prone to accelerate after an international shock, creating a domestic price-wage-price spiral of increases. It has also proved more stubborn against higher interest rates, and many economists have noted how vulnerable Britain is to the present energy crisis. And although wages are barely keeping up with price rises, they are still too high for the Bank of England's monetary policy committee. For inflation to be brought down more decisively, the economy may have to be depressed even further – leading to stagnant output and low confidence but still-rising inflation.

It's an unhappy backdrop for any new leader – though when the recovery does come, they might be able to claim the credit. If wars in Iran and Ukraine end soon, the boost would be fairly strong. If not, the slowdown may turn into a recession, or worse.

BACK TO TOP 



HS2 costs spiral to £100bn as trains delayed until 2039



It is now expected that HS2 will be more expensive than Nasa's Artemis II mission to send four astronauts to the Moon (PA)

ATHENA STAVROU
ALEX ROSS

HS2 will now cost over £100bn and will not start running until 2039 –13 years later and almost £60bn more than planned, the transport secretary has warned.

In an update on the beleaguered scheme, Heidi Alexander told the Commons yesterday that the expected costs of the high-speed railway have ballooned to between £87.7bn and £102.7bn – making it more expensive than Nasa’s Artemis II mission to send four astronauts to the Moon.

The timescale for completion has also been extended, with services now not expected to launch until sometime between May 2036 and October 2039, rather than in 2026 as initially planned.

The trains will also run slower than planned, with the maximum speed of services being 320kmph (199mph), down from the original design of 360kmph (224mph).

Earlier this year, it was reported that HS2 bosses would explore the possibility of making the trains slower as ministers consider ways to cut spiralling costs on the embattled scheme, in a move branded “unwise” by unions.

Government sources told *The Independent* that if the trains were built to current speed specifications, they would either have to be sent to China to be tested on existing tracks already engineered to run at that speed or wait until such a track was built in the UK.

Constructing the line from London to Birmingham – including the now-abandoned onward legs to Leeds and Manchester scrapped by the Conservatives, as first revealed by *The Independent* – was initially estimated to cost £32.7bn in 2011 prices, but the budget has spiralled.



Heidi Alexander has described HS2 as an ‘appalling mess’ (PA)

Ms Alexander said the cost increase was mostly because of “past misunderstanding of the work required, underestimation and inefficiency, issues within the control of HS2 Ltd, some of its suppliers, and previous governments”.

She told MPs in the Commons that she was “angry” about the “obscene increase in time and costs”, which she blamed on “the failures of successive Conservative governments”.

In an extraordinary letter to the government before the new costs were revealed, the CEO of HS2 Mark Wild pleaded with ministers not to cancel the project altogether.

In a letter sent on Friday and published yesterday, he said the cost of cancellation and remediation works to areas where building has already started could range from £33bn to as high as £58bn.

“Cancelling a programme of the scale of HS2 is unprecedented in the Western world. Accurate estimates are impossible to benchmark,” he wrote.

He said removing the assets already built could be “more complex”, as the structures “are designed to last for 120 years and not to be dismantled”.

Reacting to the increase in project time and costs, former Tory minister Sir Gavin Williamson, whose Staffordshire constituency has been heavily impacted by work on the line, said: "The cost and lack of control of HS2 is having an enormous impact not just on my constituents in terms of disruption but in terms of the pockets of everyone in this country.

"This is a busted project that has caused misery and just needs to be brought to a close as quickly as possible."

Lichfield MP Dave Robertson said: "The announcement will be a bitter pill to swallow for so many people in our part of Staffordshire. The scale of failings over more than a decade and a half are staggering."

In Water Orton in Warwickshire, where HS2 changed its plan to extend a 3.5-mile tunnel, villagers claimed initial plans were "done on the back of a fag packet".



Feli Freeman says her life has been badly affected by the building of the HS2 line near her home in Water Orton (The Independent)

Feli Freeman, who lives within sight of concrete works for the line, said: "The extra spend was foreseeable based on what we see here, where wild changes in specification have added incredible cost.

“Those initial sums, the plans, put forward to government, it was all done on the back of a fag packet. Now we’re all paying for it, in money and disruption.”

In Wendover, a Buckinghamshire town next to the Chiltern Hills with a population of around 8,000 residents, reacted without surprise to Ms Alexander’s announcement.

The community claims to have faced several years of disruption – HGV traffic, dust and noise – from work to build a viaduct and a mile-long tunnel. Murray Cooke, a retired engineer-turned secretary of the Wendover HS2 Mitigation Action Group, told *The Independent* the town had witnessed the “pure inefficiency” of the project.

“The delay and costs are all but predictable,” he added. “I’m only comforted by the fact we are slowly getting to the end of this and these people might go away in a few years’ time.

“It’s been a misery, and of no benefit with the nearest HS2 stations miles away from us.”



Work continues on the mile-long Wendover tunnel (Supplied)

The TSSA union, which represents staff employed by HS2, called on the government to give “full and determined backing” to make HS2 a reality.

“We urgently need to see greater connectivity at local, regional and national levels – the UK is already far behind other major economies around the world when it comes to high-speed rail,” its general secretary, Maryam Eslamdoust, said.

Services between Old Oak Common in west London and Birmingham’s Curzon Street station are expected to start running between May 2036 and October 2039.

But the high-speed trains will not run between Euston station in central London and Handsacre Junction in Staffordshire until between May 2040 and December 2043.

Handsacre Junction is where HS2 trains are planned to leave the dedicated high-speed tracks and merge onto the conventional West Coast Mainline.

Ms Alexander said the overall budget includes work at Euston, but the government was still seeking a private investor for the site.

Last year, Ms Alexander told the Commons she was drawing a “line in the sand” over the project, which she described as an “appalling mess”.

BACK TO TOP 



Operation Sallus: Inside the Met mission to protect domestic violence victims

Crime correspondent **Amy-Clare Martin** joins officers in London checking on victims of domestic abuse as part of a new city-wide initiative to better enforce protection orders



Operation Sallus has been rolled out in every London borough (Getty/iStock)

As officers pull up outside a Victorian terraced home in east London, they take note of the number plate of the car parked on the driveway.

They fear it could belong to a domestic abuser who has been banned from the home because he is suspected of violently assaulting his partner. He was never prosecuted for the alleged attack because the victim was not prepared to make a statement. But if they find him here, it will be grounds for his arrest.

When three officers knock on the front door, a housemate tells them the victim is out at work, but reveals the suspected abuser has been staying there too. Officers make an urgent note to return that evening.

“It’s worrying that he’s been here. That’s the whole purpose of these visits, to potentially get that window of opportunity to help,” explains Sergeant Amar Sehmy, part of the Metropolitan Police’s safer neighbourhood team for Havering.

The unannounced house call is part of a new force-wide initiative called Operation Sallus to better enforce Domestic Violence Protection Orders (DVPOs) – often under-used court orders which are supposed to help protect victims, often by banning perpetrators from contacting them.

In the past, survivors have claimed such orders were so badly monitored they were worth little more than the paper they were written on.



Detective chief superintendent Andrew Wadey (The Independent)

However, this operation, which was last month in use in every London borough following a gradual rollout, is designed to counter that perception by taking a proactive approach with regular checks on active DVPOs in each neighbourhood.

“This is quite a soft use of enforcement, but it’s very much a kind of community-based linking our community officers with victim-survivors of domestic abuse,” detective chief superintendent Andrew Wadey, the force’s lead for public protection, told *The Independent*, which was invited to join officers making house calls last week.

“It’s an in-person visit by local officers, and the intention there is to hopefully speak to the victim and ascertain if there’s been any further issues. Is the offender there, do they need any kind of referrals or signposting to support agencies and essentially just take a really sort of victim-led approach to providing assurance, reassurance, and another avenue towards reporting any kind of breaches or concerns.”

Often, police turn to a magistrate for a protective order when there is not enough evidence for a trial or a victim is not ready to support a prosecution. They are a civil order and a breach can result in an arrest, with a mandatory court appearance within 24 hours. However the short-term orders only last a maximum of 28 days and breaches are a civil offence only punishable by a fine or up to two months in prison.

They will eventually be replaced with tougher Domestic Abuse Protection Orders (DAPOs), which are currently being trialled and carry a maximum penalty of up to five years imprisonment, or a fine, or both.

In one case on the list of 10 addresses to be checked last week, the offender had already breached the DVPO twice and been arrested both times.



The Independent joined Met Police officers during Operation Sallus, enforcing Domestic Violence Protection Orders (The Independent)

Other victims Sgt Sehmbly and his team of two constables visit include a mother who was a victim of non-fatal strangulation at the hands of her own son and a woman who was strangled and thrown to the ground by her partner, who had previously threatened to kill her.

At the mother's home, no one answers the door. But, back in the van, officers manage to speak to her on the phone where she tells them she is safe and staying with her daughter.

PC Jake Tibbs told her: "If anything does happen, please call the police, obviously the order is there to protect yourself. And obviously we can deal with it as we need to."

The other strangulation victim was not at home, but officers planned to return later that night.

At a family home in east London, officers also visited a father who was protected by an order after his ex-partner was accused of seriously injuring him in a violent attack which caused grievous bodily harm and criminal damage. The officers spent 20 minutes inside the home, ensuring the order was being fully complied with.

They are also trained to look for signs of coercive and controlling behaviour and check on any children in the house.

The Met plans to start using the same tactics to enforce Stalking Protection Orders and Sexual Risk Orders in the coming months. According to the force, the strategy, along with other innovative approaches to tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG), is starting to bear fruit.

In addition to Operation Sallus, the Met has been using counterterrorism tactics to track the highest risk VAWG offenders through their V100 programme and deployed undercover patrols to crack down on predatory behaviour in night-time hotspots as part of Project Vigilant.

New figures show that arrests and charges for rape offences have more than doubled over the last year in London, making the Met the force with highest detection and charge rate for rape.



The Met say charges and arrests for domestic abuse have increased (PA)

Arrests and charges for domestic violence have also increased by 82 per cent year on year, and arrests and charges for violence against women and girls have increased by 71 per cent. DCS Wadey said they are “really starting to see the dial turn in terms of more people being charged”.

“And whilst the work is by no means done, there’s still so much more to do, this is really giving us momentum, I think, which is key. And hopefully it is giving greater confidence, particularly to women and girls, to report,” he added.

He admitted there was still “much to be done” to rebuild confidence in the force after a difficult few years which saw the organisation labelled as “institutionally racist, misogynistic and homophobic” in a damning report by Baroness Louise Casey in 2023. It was commissioned following the rape and murder of Sarah Everard by a serving officer in 2021, who used his warrant card to trick her into his car.

Yet more scandal has followed, with another officer, David Carrick unmasked as one of Britain’s worst sex offenders in 2023 and a damning undercover BBC *Panorama* investigation at Charing Cross police station last year, which showed officers making offensive comments and bragging about using violence.

The police chief believes Labour’s ambitious manifesto pledge to halve VAWG in just 10 years is achievable, but will require a “whole system approach”.

Domestic abuse charity Refuge has welcomed the efforts to improve monitoring and enforcement of DVPOs in London, but called for an increase in their use, adding: “Only when these orders are properly implemented will survivors be able to access the full protection of the law.”

Some 3.8 million people experienced domestic abuse in the year ending March 2025, according to the Crime Survey for England and Wales. In comparison, only 11,401 DVPOs were granted in the year to March 2024, according to the most recent ONS figures.

Bo Bottomley, policy and public affairs manager at Refuge, said: “One in four women in England and Wales will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime, but Domestic Violence Protection Orders (DVPOs) are used in only a very small number of cases.

“Where protective orders are in place, survivors often tell us they are ineffective and not properly monitored and enforced by the police. Perpetrators routinely breach these orders, but police often fail to act when they do, leaving survivors at an increased risk of harm.

“We welcome efforts to improve monitoring and enforcement of DVPOs in London, but to truly improve survivor safety and strengthen confidence in the police response to domestic abuse, Refuge is calling for increased use of DVPOs in relevant cases, and a corresponding increase in criminal proceedings following order breaches.”

[BACK TO TOP ^](#)



Three is a magic number



From left: Josh Widdicombe, Emma Willis and Johannes Radebe will take over from Tess Daly and Claudia Winkleman (Photos BBC)

JACOB STOLWORTHY
LAUREN MORRIS

The BBC has been dancing around the speculation for months, but Emma Willis, Josh Widdicombe and Johannes Radebe have been confirmed as the new hosts of *Strictly Come Dancing*.

The trio will be the show's first line-up of three presenters since Tess Daly, Bruce Forsyth and Claudia Winkleman fronted the format together in 2013.

Sharing the news in a statement, Willis said that she's a "huge fan" of *Strictly* and "can't quite comprehend" becoming a presenter on the show. "It's impossible to fill the shoes that Tess and Claudia have left behind – two wonderful, iconic women who have been the beating heart of *Strictly* for so long," she said.

"I can only hope that we are able to help to steer the ship as beautifully as they have, into this new chapter. I can't wait to spend my weekends with Josh and Jojo, the incredible dancers and the judges. Fingers crossed for a 10 from them!"

Widdicombe – who competed in the 2024 Christmas Special – said that dancing the Charleston while dressed as a penguin "remains my career high point". He added: "I am giddy with excitement, honoured and a little overawed to be given the chance to step into the biggest shoes in television. I adore Emma and Jojo and can't wait to spend my weekends with them. I'll dust off the penguin costume."

At the weekend, Widdicombe described his appearance on the show as the "worst day" of his career after realising that he was the "worst dancer" in the line-up.



Radebe, Widdicombe and Willis were chosen in a selection process that also reportedly included Rylan Clark and Alison Hammond

Radebe, who is rumoured to be taking on a “roving reporter” role, added: “To be returning to *Strictly Come Dancing* in this new role is beyond anything I ever imagined.

“This show has always stood for joy, heart, and togetherness, and I feel deeply honoured to now help carry that magic forward. To do it alongside the formidable Emma Willis and the utterly brilliant Josh Widdicombe makes it even more special. I’m ready – sequins, nerves, and all, please bear with me. Love Jojo.”

Rumours have been swirling ever since Daly and Winkleman announced they were stepping away from the BBC competition, and Willis emerged as a frontrunner in recent weeks.

However tough the task, producers are hoping to recapture Daly and Winkleman’s dynamic styles, with the former’s sleek

professionalism in the main studio and *Traitors* presenter Winkleman's mastery of controlled chaos in the "Clauditorium".

Their hiring follows a rigorous casting process, involving filmed auditions and chemistry tests, which is believed to have put presenters including Angela Scanlon, Rylan Clark and Alison Hammond through their paces.

The *Strictly* hosting roles are among the biggest jobs in UK showbusiness and taking them on is a major commitment: the series runs for three months every year, with the live show and results show recorded on Saturday nights.

Zoe Ball was a frontrunner to replace Daly and Winkleman earlier this year, however she confirmed in May that she was not offered the role. "I didn't get it, but it's OK," she said on her podcast, *Dig It*.

"If who I think has got it, we're in safe hands and our new hosts are going to be fabulous. I'm so thrilled for them, and hopefully at a later date, we'll be able to talk about them in more detail."

Alan Carr also ruled himself out of the competition, admitting that he did not "love it enough". He told *The Telegraph* in May: "I didn't turn it down, I was just clumped with everyone and had to say: 'No, don't put me in the mix.' I love watching *Strictly*, but I don't love it enough. People are always moaning there aren't new, fresh faces on TV. Well, wouldn't it be amazing to give it to a young person who absolutely adores *Strictly* and dancing?"

While Daly and Winkleman hosted the pre-recorded *Strictly* festive special, the 2025 series's grand final marked their final time in the ballroom as it was recorded live one week before Christmas.

The pair were given a suitably emotional send-off as Anton du Beke reduced Daly to tears with a touching tribute to her time on the show, before the annual montage of fans sharing their favourite moments segued into a celebration of the presenters.



Pictures of the Day



Content creation

A man swims in a canal to cool off on a hot summer afternoon in Lahore, Pakistan. *AFP/Getty*



Wide buoyant

Adventurer and TV personality Jordan Wylie is instructed on how to float in open waters as he helps launch the RNLI lifesaving Float to Live campaign at The Wave in Bristol. *PA*



Bunny business

US actor Kristine Froseth poses during a photocall for the film *Her Private Hell* at the Cannes Film Festival. *AFP/Getty*



Branch line

A train passes through a forest in the Taunus region of Frankfurt, Germany. *AP*



The Great is washed

Museum of Urban Sculpture staff clean the statue of Russian Tsarina Catherine the Great in St Petersburg, Russia. *AP*



Home news in brief



Shona Manderson has accused her on-screen partner of sexual misconduct (Channel 4/BBC)

Police urge reality show victims to come forward

Police have urged potential victims of sexual assault on reality TV show *Married At First Sight UK* to get in touch, after three women made allegations of rape and sexual misconduct.

Shona Manderson accused her on-screen partner of sexual misconduct while on the Channel 4 show, while two other women alleged they were raped by their on-screen husbands, while speaking in a BBC *Panorama* documentary.

A Metropolitan Police spokesperson said: “We are aware of media reporting relating to allegations of rape and sexual assault following the airing of a television programme on Monday, May 18. At this time, we have not received any criminal reports in relation to this matter. We will be making approaches to the relevant production teams to ensure that anyone they have spoken to is aware of how to report any criminal allegations to police.”

Ms Manderson’s on-screen partner, Bradley Skelly, told *Panorama* he categorically denies “any allegations of sexual misconduct, or that he was controlling”.

Petrol prices at their highest since 2022

Petrol prices across the UK have reached their highest point since December 2022, new figures show. The average cost of a litre of petrol at British forecourts currently stands at 158.5p, according to the RAC.

This latest surge follows a period of volatility, with prices previously peaking at 158.3p on 15 April, shortly after the conflict in the Middle East began on 28 February. While the average price saw a slight dip of more than a penny per litre until early May, it has since resumed an upward trajectory.

Simon Williams, head of policy at the RAC, described the recent increase as “bad news for drivers ahead of the bank holiday” and cautioned that further rises are anticipated. He said: “RAC analysis of wholesale fuel data unfortunately indicates that unleaded is now likely to increase to at least 160p a litre in the coming weeks, unless there’s a dramatic and sustained drop in the price of oil which has been above \$100 a barrel since late April.”

Met seeks charges against 57 people over Grenfell fire

The Metropolitan Police will ask the Crown Prosecution Service to consider charges against 57 individuals and 20 organisations over the Grenfell Tower fire.

The force confirmed in an update yesterday that files of evidence will be submitted to the CPS by 30 September this year, with charging decisions before 14 June 2027 – the 10th anniversary of the disaster. Officers said 165 million electronic files had been gathered and searched for evidence, while 14,400 statements had been taken.

Bereaved relatives and survivors, who say they have already faced an unacceptably long wait for justice, met the news with “caution, grief and determination”.

The blaze in June 2017 claimed the lives of 72 people and was found by a public inquiry to have been avoidable.

Temperatures to soar for bank holiday weekend

London is bracing for what could be the hottest day of the year so far, with temperatures forecast to reach 28C on Friday, marking a stark contrast to the unusually cool month up until now.

Most of England and Wales, as well as parts of Scotland, will see above-average temperatures.

The east coast could see mid-to-high 20Cs, while Wales and western parts of the north of England may reach 25C.

The hottest temperature of the year so far was 26.6C in Kew Gardens, southwest London, on 8 April.

BACK TO TOP ^



China denies Xi criticised Putin over Ukraine invasion

‘He will regret war’, said Xi at summit, according to reports



Vladimir Putin is welcomed by Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi in Beijing yesterday (AFP/Getty)

MAIRA BUTT

China has refuted claims Xi Jinping told Donald Trump that Vladimir Putin could regret invading Ukraine, as the Russian leader arrived in Beijing yesterday.

Mr Xi is reported to have made the remarks during wide-ranging talks between the US and Chinese delegations in Beijing last

week, according to the *Financial Times*.

“The information you mentioned does not match the facts and is completely fabricated out of thin air,” foreign ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun told reporters.

An X account for the Chinese ministry of foreign affairs’ spokesperson added: “Completely false”, alongside a picture of the headline.

Mr Putin’s two-day visit comes less than a week after the US leader’s high-profile attendance and is his 25th to China.



Putin and Xi during a summit in Tianjin last August (Reuters)

The alleged comment suggests a tension between the two staunch allies, despite Beijing’s continued military and economic support. Mr Putin’s decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022 came three weeks after Russia signed a “no-limits” partnership agreement with China.

Reports also alleged that Mr Trump posited that Russia, China and the US should join forces against the International Criminal Court. China denied the claims yesterday.

Ahead of his visit yesterday, Mr Putin emphasised the close relationship between the two countries, saying they were ready to support each other on a wide range of issues, including national unity and protection of sovereignty.

The Kremlin said the two sides will discuss the proposed Power of Siberia 2 gas pipeline, which could one day deliver an additional 50 billion cubic metres of gas per year from Russia's vast Arctic gas fields via Mongolia to China.

“During the visit, the two heads of state will exchange views on cooperation across all areas of bilateral relations, as well as on international and regional issues of mutual concern,” Guo Jiakun, spokesperson at the Chinese Foreign Ministry, told a regular news conference on Monday.

Western military experts have said that Ukraine may be gaining ground due to its innovation and strategy in drone warfare, combined with growing fatigue in the Russian military and domestic pressure on Mr Putin.



Donald Trump and Xi Jinping during a visit to the Zhongnanhai Garden in Beijing last week (Reuters)

Mr Putin has faced a slow drop in popularity according to opinion polls, with ordinary Russians facing internet disruption and a sluggish economy.

With Ukraine increasing its long-range drone strikes, it has become increasingly difficult for the Kremlin to cast the war as something that does not affect the daily lives of Russian citizens.

Over the weekend, Ukraine launched a massive weekend aerial attack in the Moscow region that killed three people, according to Russian authorities.

Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky said the attack in the capital's suburbs was retribution for relentless Russian missile and drone strikes on the capital of Kyiv and other cities last week.

Mr Trump had claimed last week that the end to the war was "getting very close", even though US efforts to help broker an end to the fighting have failed to make any significant progress and are effectively on hold since the start of the war in Iran.

[BACK TO TOP ^](#)



Mango founder's son is arrested over father's death



Police escort Jonathan Andic, the son of Isak Andic, as he arrives at a court in Martorell, near Barcelona (AFP/Getty)

GRAHAM KEELEY

The son of the billionaire Mango founder, Isak Andic, who died in a fall from a cliff two years ago, has been arrested over the death of his father.

Jonathan Andic, 45, was arrested yesterday on suspicion of homicide and appeared in handcuffs before the courthouse in

Martorell, a city near Barcelona. His 71-year-old father died after falling more than 100 metres while hiking with members of his family in the Montserrat caves near Barcelona in December 2024.

A spokesman for Mossos d'Esquadra, the Catalan regional police, said: "I can confirm the detention of Jonathan Andic on suspicion of the homicide of his father, Isak Andic."



Isak Andic (left), Kate Moss and Terry Richardson at a Mango collection launch in Paris in 2011 (Getty)

Spanish media reported at the time that Andic fell down a ravine to his death while hiking in an area which is part of the Montserrat mountain range. He was with Jonathan when the accident happened. A large-scale emergency operation was launched using helicopters and search and rescue teams, but Andic suffered multiple injuries and died at the scene.

Yesterday, the Andic family issued a statement in which it said: "Jonathan Andic is appearing before the court in connection with the accident which occurred on 14 December 2024. At this moment, we cannot add more because a secrecy order has been placed over the case. Our collaboration has and will be total."

Seen as a rival of Zara founder Amancio Ortega, Andic, a Turkish-born businessman, founded Mango with the help of his brother, Nahman, in Barcelona in 1984. The chain now operates

in almost 3,000 outlets in 120 countries. At the time of his death, he was non-executive chair of the fashion brand and worth \$4.5bn, according to *Forbes*.



Andic died after falling more than 100 metres while hiking in caves near Barcelona (AP)

He raised the profile of the brand by inviting models including Kate Moss, Claudia Schiffer, Naomi Campbell and Kendall Jenner to his collections. He counted among his close friends Queen Letizia of Spain, who delivered a homage to the businessman when he died.

Jonathan Andic has always denied any responsibility for his father's death and said he suffered an accidental fall while they were hiking together at a popular tourist spot. The original investigation into the death of the Mango founder was closed in January 2025 after a judge said there was no evidence of wrongdoing.

However, it was later reopened and police examined the mobile telephone of Jonathan Andic and his sisters Judith and Sarah Andic. Last year, the Andic family said it was confident Jonathan was innocent after several local media reported he was being investigated.



The chain now operates in almost 3,000 outlets in 120 countries (AFP/Getty)

The family said in a statement that it "will continue to cooperate, as has done until now, with the competent authorities. Furthermore, it trusts that this process will be concluded as soon as possible and that it will prove Jonathan Andic's innocence."

Jonathan Andic was appointed vice-president of the board of the privately held company on his father's death and president of its holding company, MNG. His sisters Judith and Sarah were named as vice-presidents of MNG. Chief executive officer Toni Ruiz also became chair of the board after Andic's death.

After Andic's death, Ruiz said: "His departure leaves a huge void, but all of us are, in some way, his legacy, and the testimony of his achievements. It is up to us, and this is the best tribute we can make to Isak and which we will fulfil, to ensure that Mango continues to be the project that Isak aspired to and of which we would feel proud."



World news in brief



A biomedical laboratory in Goma yesterday where samples are being tested for Ebola (Reuters)

WHO warns about scale of Ebola outbreak in DR Congo

The World Health Organisation director general expressed his fears yesterday over the “scale and speed” of an outbreak of a rare type of Ebola in eastern Congo, where authorities reported a sharp increase in suspected deaths – to at least 134 – and more than 500 suspected cases.

The virus spread undetected for weeks after the first known death as authorities tested for a more common type of Ebola and came up negative, health experts and aid workers said. The Bundibugyo virus has no approved medicines or vaccines.

Congo's health minister, Samuel Roger Kamba, said at a press conference that 69 cases had been treated and 134 people have died since the outbreak began.

WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said he was "deeply concerned about the scale and speed of the epidemic" adding that the UN health agency will convene its emergency committee. *AP*

Canister with Nazi symbol found at San Diego mosque shooting

A gas canister marked with a Nazi symbol was found at the scene of a deadly shooting at a mosque in San Diego, as authorities investigate the crime. Hate speech was also written on the firearms used in the shooting and anti-Islamic writing was found in the suspects' vehicle, a source told the *New York Post*.

Three people, including a security guard, were killed during the attack at the Islamic Center of San Diego on Monday. The two teenage suspects were found dead in a car near the mosque with apparent self-inflicted gunshot wounds.

A law enforcement said the canister, which was marked with an "SS" sticker, and a shotgun were located where the gunmen's bodies were discovered.

Nato jet shoots down Ukrainian drone in Estonia

Ukraine has accused Russia of diverting one of its drones into Estonian airspace, leading to a Nato jet shooting it down. The drone entered the country's airspace at around noon (0900 GMT) yesterday, coming from Russia and into the southeastern part of the country, the Estonian military said in a statement. It was shot down by a Romanian Nato fighter jet on a training flight at 12.14pm (0914 GMT), with a single missile.

"The incident occurred under the conditions of heavy electronic warfare, including GPS spoofing and jamming, by Russia," the Estonian military added. The drone had been under surveillance before it entered Estonia, it added, with the decision to shoot it

down taken to “minimise the impact on the civilian population and infrastructure”.

LGBT+ carnival in Hong Kong scrapped for second year

Hong Kong’s biggest LGBT+ carnival was cancelled for the second successive year after organisers said they had failed to get the necessary licences and lost access to their venue just weeks before the event.

Organisers of Pink Dot HK said in a statement that this year’s outdoor carnival, scheduled for 14 June, would no longer go ahead after the venue operator, Link Reit, withdrew access to Stanley Plaza and Murray House, where the event was due to take place.

“With just a month to go until the scheduled event date, we’ve been diligently following procedures to apply for the necessary licences but haven’t yet received approval from the relevant authorities,” organisers wrote on Instagram.

Founded in 2014 and inspired by Singapore’s Pink Dot movement, Pink Dot HK grew into one of Hong Kong’s most visible LGBT+ events, combining concerts, workshops, and community activities.

BACK TO TOP 



Why Trump and Putin are willing to bend the knee to Xi



President Xi of China has hosted Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin in quick succession (Getty)

MARK ALMOND



The arrival of Vladimir Putin in Beijing so soon after Donald Trump's visit marks a watershed in international relations.

The leaders of the dominant superpowers of the second half of the 20th century are visibly passing the baton of global pre-eminence to China. Both the Russian and American presidents

visit Beijing nowadays as supplicants looking for support and endorsement from the resident in the Forbidden City.

Beijing seems to be returning to the traditional role of a Chinese imperial capital. It is the sun around which all other planets revolve.

China would like the wars in Ukraine and Iran to end. It would like to reopen the overland rail links to Europe via Russia and Ukraine just in case relations with USA, post-Trump, sour. Xi could mediate a settlement between Kremlin and Kyiv where Trump failed so miserably.

That is why every signal to come from Beijing is pored over. This morning the *Financial Times* reported on Xi's indiscretion to Trump that Vladimir Putin might "come to regret" his invasion of Ukraine, which has truly moved the needle – China has now denied this.

What is certain is that Russia is bogged down in war in Ukraine, with growing Ukrainian drone strikes even east of Moscow embarrassing Putin. The USA appears at an impasse in Iran. Donald Trump's announcement on the eve of Putin's arrival in China that he was stalling restarting the bombing of Iran at the "request" of Gulf Arab leaders was probably a fig-leaf to avoid forcing Xi and Putin to coordinate their response in real time. Maybe Trump hopes that Iran's two major supporters would influence Tehran to make concessions to avoid renewed conflict.

Xi Jinping's successive summits in Beijing show China is now the linchpin of an emerging global dystopia



More importantly, President Xi is shepherding the two other nuclear behemoths into global cooperation with him as the chair not only of the People's Republic of China but of a much more

formidable version of Donald Trump's "Board of Peace" for the Middle East.

China wants to avoid the so-called "Thucydides Trap". Xi Jinping has referred to the infamous Ancient Greek model of a great war between a rising power and the established one. The war between Athens and Sparta is seen as an analogy to the Anglo-German rivalries which led to two world wars last century.

America has its own designs. Some Trump observers have even speculated that the US president has been "soft" on Russia's invasion of Ukraine because he hoped to draw Vladimir Putin away from Xi's embrace. In effect, Trump was playing a reverse of the Nixon-Kissinger embrace of Mao's China after 1971 to exploit the tensions between Moscow and Beijing.

Much more likely is American acceptance of spheres of influence. Russia abandons its allies in the Americas like Venezuela and Cuba in return for Washington's indifference in Eastern Europe. China, too, gets its economic interests respected.

Who is the loser if the "Big Three" coordinate?

Smaller neighbours certainly face a grim future but the big loser looks set to be Europe.

Europe occupies a much lower position in Beijing's hierarchy of importance. Think how China's big bet on electric vehicles has dramatically reduced the German automobile industry's share of world car production.

Russia and the USA produce raw materials which China cannot do without. Both supply foodstuffs and Russia sells energy and metals to fuel Chinese industry. Europe competes with Chinese industry but its legacy producers face much higher energy costs because of sanctions on Russia and now Trump's attack on Iran as well as their governments' commitment to green energy.

Europe is fading as a source of Chinese imports and its attempts to assert its economic and intellectual property sovereignty simultaneously vis-à-vis China, Russia and the USA seem doomed. At best, the Europeans can shelter behind a regulatory

Great Firewall for a few more decades – but China’s own history shows how vulnerable such defences are in an age of rapid technological change.

Once “values” united the West versus the rest. But increasingly shrill condemnations of Donald Trump’s trampling on them reveal that Europe is as indignant as it is impotent.

For instance, China, Russia and the USA have in common that none of them is a member of the International Criminal Court, though its prosecutors are investigating Vladimir Putin for the consequences of his invasion of Ukraine as well as Trump’s closest ally, Israel’s Benjamin Netanyahu, for the human cost of the Gaza war.

Trump is reported to have suggested that China and Russia join the USA against the International Criminal Court which represents one of Europe’s key values – accountability of political leaders. But without support from the key great powers, the ICC is rendered impotent, or at best a place for political small fry to face justice, which discredits the idea of global justice.

Xi Jinping’s successive summits in Beijing show China is now the linchpin of an emerging global dystopia. Europeans pin their hopes on change in Moscow or Washington rather than their own capacity to influence the way the world is run.



[BACK TO TOP ^](#)



Burnham would face crucial test in choice of chancellor



Andy Burnham says Britain's economy has been on 'the wrong path for 40 years' (Getty)

JOHN RENTOUL



It seems that an Andy Burnham government would be in hock to the bond markets after all. On Monday, he swore allegiance to Rachel Reeves's existing fiscal rules, and in full. His spokesperson confirmed that any blue-sky thinking about borrowing off the books for defence is now for the birds.

At the same time, Burnham – now confirmed as the Labour by-election candidate – repeated his line that Britain has been on the “wrong path” for 40 years, pursuing an economic model that has failed to deliver for places such as Macclesfield. It therefore matters greatly who will be chancellor in a Burnham government: who will be charged with resolving the challenge of changing everything while keeping the markets happy?

The question is naturally brushed off as premature by Burnham’s people, although they are quite happy to feature vox pops with voters saying that he should be prime minister, doing for the country what he has done for Manchester, in a video for a by-election.

We do not know what deals have been done in Burnham’s publicised meetings with Angela Rayner, but we suspect that the Treasury was not on offer. Rayner has spent some of her enforced absence from government talking to City people and impressing them by exceeding their low expectations, but underpaying tax is not an obvious qualification for a chancellor. She is likely to come back to a big job, but not that one.

The overriding consideration ought to be to reassure the markets. We have seen how they responded to the uncertainty surrounding Keir Starmer’s premiership, pushing up the cost of borrowing. The first aim of appointing a chancellor will be to get that cost down again.

Which means that Ed Miliband should be off the list. He may think that the mantle of Gordon Brown’s Treasury qualifies him for the post, but his record as energy secretary alone ought to contradict him. The economics of energy and of carbon reduction is complex, but he has ended up in a situation where he accepts that Britain will need oil and gas for decades to come, yet he would prefer to import it than increase North Sea production.

What about going to the other extreme and giving the markets the stability they crave by keeping Rachel Reeves in 11 Downing Street? However unpopular she is with the voters, she has some credibility with the markets – indeed, part of her unpopularity is

because she is prepared to stand against demands from her party for even higher public spending.

Anyone talking about ‘the end of neoliberalism’ either doesn’t understand economics or is trying to appeal to people who don’t understand economics



She hasn’t done it well, and she has given in to pressure from the prime minister to restore most of the pensioners’ winter fuel payment, allow disability spending to continue to rise and restore benefits to larger families. And she may have put up the wrong taxes, but she has refused to budge on the fiscal rules that keep borrowing under control.

All the same, for a new prime minister trying to present himself as “change” and “the end of neoliberalism”, keeping the same chancellor would be too obvious an admission that he was offering pie in the sky. Besides, Reeves has no base in the party. For her, it is likely to be thank you and goodnight.

Who else, then? Once upon a time – in the middle of last week, perhaps – Wes Streeting would have had a good claim. On the so-called right of the party, his instinct is that taxes, borrowing and public spending are all too high and should be reduced. But his stock in the party has fallen to UK Eurovision entry levels, according to Monday’s YouGov poll of Labour members. Perhaps, given that the NHS is showing early signs of recovery, he should be asked to return to that difficult task.

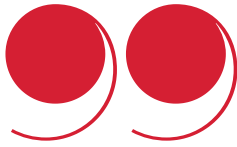
And it cannot be Yvette Cooper, because her husband Ed Balls would immediately, if unfairly, be dubbed the real chancellor – even if his views on devolution are a good fit with Burnham’s.

In my view, the best candidates would be Pat McFadden, the work and pensions secretary, or Shabana Mahmood, the home secretary. Either would reassure the buyers of gilts that the

national finances were in safe hands. McFadden is not a flashy politician, and he is not close to Burnham, but he is a team player and a solid media performer.

Mahmood has fewer economics credentials, although she, like McFadden, has been shadow chief secretary to the Treasury. But she is needed at the Home Office to hold a strong line on immigration.

Anyone talking about “the end of neoliberalism” either doesn’t understand economics or is trying to appeal to people who don’t understand economics. We must hope Burnham is in the second category. If he wins in Makerfield, his choice of chancellor will be the test.



BACK TO TOP 



I have ADHD, but giving me a blue badge is ridiculous



The number of people with 'hidden disabilities' applying for blue badges has apparently trebled in three years to 55,000 (Getty)

VICTORIA RICHARDS



This week, I hesitated while signing up for a half-marathon, because the form asked whether I have a “disability”. My mouse hovered over the button, dithering between “yes” and “no”.

I don't think of myself as disabled, you see – even though ADHD is legally recognised as a disability in the UK under the

Equality Act 2010, if it has a "substantial and long-term adverse effect" on your ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. Like going shopping in a supermarket, perhaps? I can't do that. But I still think it's an outrage to give people like me a blue badge. I'd rather avoid going shopping altogether than feel like a fraud by parking right outside when I don't really need to.

Not everyone feels the way I do, though, and the number of people with "hidden disabilities" like mine applying for blue badges has apparently trebled in three years to 55,000, up from 18,000 in 2021 – helped, some say, by viral videos on social media coaching people on how to game the system using ADHD diagnoses.

It's impossible to break it down and find out how many rogue operators there are. When the Department for Transport decided to extend the scheme in 2019, that included people with Parkinson's disease, dementia, physical disabilities which don't necessarily require the use of wheelchairs or crutches but still make it difficult to get around (including lupus and arthritis), autism, sight or hearing loss, chronic pain and mental health issues such as depression and severe anxiety – all legit.

Blue badges are meant to be for those who can't make a journey without "a risk of serious harm to health or safety" (including children); "considerable physical distress" or have difficulty with "both the physical act and the experience of walking". And unless you have a combined diagnosis, such as ADHD *and* a physical disability (or your ADHD causes you debilitating anxiety), then I just don't get it, sorry. A blue badge for ADHD alone doesn't feel right – and I say this as someone who hasn't been able to shop in a large supermarket for a decade.

Why? Well, stepping into a big, noisy shop feels, to me, like torture; the equivalent of taking my brain out and chucking it in a washing machine to give it a hot wash, spin and dry. The same goes for shopping malls like Westfield, any bright and busy restaurant where everyone talks at the same time (with background music) – or train stations.

I don't believe the challenges I have to deal with are difficult enough to warrant the kind of support some people need, like closer parking



But supermarkets are the worst for my own peculiar brand of neurodivergent sensory sensitivity. The lights are too dazzling, the acoustics echoey and loud and there's just something about the starkness, the sterility – plus the shelves heaving with colourful produce – that interrupts my ability to talk, think or remember even the simplest items on my list. I imagine it's a bit like a teenager encountering one of those high-pitched Mosquito alarms only people under 25 can hear: uncomfortable, disorientating and sometimes, even painful.

I've tried different coping strategies, over the years: earplugs, headphones, simple mnemonics like “CAT” (crisps, avocado, toilet paper) to try to remember what to buy. But something in my brain always disrupts the process. I wander aimlessly down the wrong aisles, get lost and forget them anyway.

A few times, I even resorted to slapping my own face to try and force myself to focus – but nothing worked. Nine times out of 10, I'd leave my basket on the floor and walk out, all wobbly and empty-handed. Not that this should matter, but I have a master's degree and I'm doing a PhD – you'd think I'd be able to function in a supermarket, wouldn't you?

But I can't. And so I do that other thing so many people with ADHD will recognise – I pay an ADHD “tax”. I make trips to more expensive, smaller shops during the week that I don't find so difficult to cope with. I get food delivered – and pay extra charges for that. I splash out on pricey recipe boxes like Gousto because they arrive with all of the ingredients, so I don't have to go out looking.

Like so many women, I didn't find out I had the condition until I was in my thirties – at school, I was a “daydreamer” who “couldn't focus”, rather than some of the boys who were bouncing off the walls. Eventually, after finding out that ADHD runs through three generations of my family (and has a heritability rate of 74 per cent), I received my all-too-predictable diagnosis.

But I still don't think of myself as “disabled”, perhaps – in part – because I don't believe the challenges I have to deal with are difficult enough to warrant the kind of support some people need, like closer parking. If I had mobility issues *and* ADHD, it would be a different story, but I don't. Taking a blue badge from the government to get special treatment – and risking cutting the chances for someone else – would feel like a cruel joke.

Don't get me wrong: it's great that ADHD is recognised as a “hidden disability”. I know how unbearable it can be to deal with on a bad day. I've felt the pain of hyperarousal, the “ants beneath my skin” sensitivity, the frozen terror of task paralysis, the panic when you're late. I understand the feelings of overwhelm, emotional reactivity and burnout, intimately.

It's vital that we have representation; that people don't continue to believe the hype and the stigma or the sweeping and ignorant statements about “overdiagnosis” or children wearing ear defenders. And it's never been more difficult to be neurodiverse, because half the time, people (including powerful politicians) don't believe us anyway.

But taking advantage of blue badges when we don't really need them only makes us look worse.



BACK TO TOP [^](#)



Starmer is smiling through a grim stage of his premiership



In photo after photo in the past 10 days, the prime minister has never looked happier (Reuters)

CLEO WATSON



Keir Starmer gets a lot of grief for being inauthentic. Never has this been truer than in photos of him in the last 10 days since the local elections, where he has had to do his best to look buoyant, vital and workmanlike. He must be so miserable underneath it all.

He has been clear he won't be "walking away" from Downing Street any time soon (which is true in at least one respect – prime ministers depart by car), not unless Labour MPs can organise themselves to follow due process to oust him. Putting Starmer's obsession with process to one side (it is a regular theme), there is something admirable about his ability to cling on with a faux smile. A bit like Tom Cruise holding onto a plane mid-takeoff in *Mission: Impossible*. I suspect they use the same implacable hair product too.

The PM is in a horrible stage of his premiership. Most commentators already talk with certainty of an imminent leadership contest and of the prime minister as a lame duck. As I wrote months ago, harking back to my days as a political adviser in Theresa May's end days, the writing has been on the wall for some time and reaching the end of each nightmarish week feels a grim achievement for the Downing Street team.

He knows at least 90 of his own MPs want him gone and, as a recent More in Common chart showed, swathes of the public most associate his achievements with the word "nothing". As legacies go, it isn't up there. Can you imagine what it must do to a person to have so many strangers have a deep, almost visceral hatred for you?

He's in the depressing death march stage. But to show how he's actually feeling – angry, depressed, wounded and misunderstood – is simply not possible



Worst of all, so many of the people he knows – and has known for a long time – have deeply hurt him. Many of the main characters in the Labour Party soap opera (sponsored this week by the Greater Manchester tourist board) have known each other for decades. Some of these conversations are the ones they

were having in common rooms 30 years ago. Betrayals happen in politics, but they rarely heal.

So he's in the depressing death march stage. But to show how he's actually feeling – angry, depressed, wounded and misunderstood – is simply not possible. There are snippets, of course. He hit the famous brand of “PM returning from Commons in back of Jag looking like a cadaver” photo some weeks ago. But when he knows there are cameras about, he's put on a very brave face: to pop out with his wife to vote in the locals; to have a cup of tea in a cafe.

The thing is, he has actually got quite a fun stage coming, once he has stepped down and the sweet relief of all this ghastliness is over and he has recovered from the initial anti-climax. David Cameron bounced back immediately, humming between the lectern and the No 10 front door after he made his resignation speech.

Theresa May went to Lord's and hosted the World Cup-winning England cricket team at Number 10 in her final days. Boris Johnson evidently had an absolute hoot putting together his resignation honours list. The football World Cup in the US beckons. His kids and wife certainly deserve a holiday. And he may well be enjoying a sense of schadenfreude by Christmas, when his successor is discovering that the job comes with its problems, but that he (because it will be a he) has to plaster a smile on his face and step outside that famous front door to turn singing carols, turn on the tree lights and pretend that everything is absolutely fine. Never better. Honest.

Cleo Watson is a former deputy chief of staff to Boris Johnson and co-host of The Independent's politics podcast, 'In The Room', with ex-deputy cabinet secretary Helen MacNamara. New episodes come out every Tuesday on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and YouTube



Section 2/ The Longer Read

Wes Streeting ‘abandoned women’ by quitting his job

The former health secretary once called the state of maternity services a ‘cause for national shame’, but his resignation is just another example of him deprioritising women’s concerns, campaigners tell **Rosie Taylor**



Streeting’s most decisive actions as health secretary were to cut services, including ring-fenced funding for Women’s Health Hubs, campaigners say (PA)

There’s too much obfuscation, too much passing the buck and giving lip service.” That’s how the now ex-health secretary, Wes Streeting, described previous attempts to tackle the crisis in

NHS maternity care, in a passionate speech last year. But during his two-year tenure at the helm of the Department of Health and Social Care, campaigners say it's often been him who has obfuscated, passed the buck and given lip service to issues without making good on his promises – particularly when it comes to women's health.

The Labour MP for Ilford North resigned his ministerial post last week in protest at Labour's poor performance in the local elections and has since confirmed he will challenge prime minister Keir Starmer in any leadership contest. However, a YouGov poll shows that most Labour members think he was wrong to resign as health secretary (57 per cent) and that Starmer would beat Streeter in a leadership challenge by 65 per cent to 15 per cent.

Maternity campaigners say they are “disappointed and frustrated” by Streeter deserting his post, believing he has broken promises to push through desperately-needed improvements to maternity services.

“For more than 10 years, maternal health has been devastated by politicians who failed to recognise it as a public health crisis. Streeter has done something arguably more dangerous – he said many of the right things, and then behaved just as his predecessors have done,” says Jo Cruse, founder of maternity campaigning group Delivering Better. She describes his tenure as “political gaslighting on a grand scale”, adding: “He was so busy using the cause to bolster his political profile that he appeared to have forgotten he actually needed to do something meaningful to change it.”



Maternity care campaigners are deeply concerned that Streeting's resignation will damage their calls for vital improvements (Getty)

His resignation as health secretary comes just a month before the expected publication of the national investigation into maternity and neonatal care in England, led by Baroness Amos, which Streeting commissioned. Streeting had pledged to “personally lead” a taskforce to see its recommendations put into action – but his resignation means that will no longer happen.

Now, the Department of Health and Social Care has announced the appointment of a new maternity adviser, Michelle Welsh MP, who was herself harmed by poor maternity care and has long campaigned for change. But this is unlikely to rebuild the trust that Streeting has lost.

When Streeting came into office in July 2024, he described the state of maternity services as a “cause for national shame” and an issue which “keeps him up at night”. Maternal death rates in the UK are at their highest levels in 20 years, and half of NHS maternity departments in England require urgent safety improvements, while maternity negligence claims account for 42 per cent of all NHS England compensation payouts – costing the taxpayer £1.3bn in 2024/25.

But he then spent months ignoring repeated requests to meet with victims of poor care. It was only after his office was exposed

in October 2024 for sending a crassly insensitive “cut and paste” dismissal to a mother whose baby had died, that he finally agreed to meet families.



He was so busy using the cause to bolster his political profile that he appeared to have forgotten he actually needed to do something meaningful to change it

Jo Cruse, founder of maternity campaigning group



Even then their stories did not provoke the kind of immediate action that campaigners had hoped for and which was desperately needed. In June last year, he commissioned the Amos investigation, and in January, a report by MPs found his department’s “failure to address problems with maternity care” had led to “avoidable harm and unnecessary costs”.

With no publication date for the inquiry given and as Streeting leaves his post, campaigners have been left in dismay.

“A change of health secretary at this moment is the last thing women, babies and midwives need at such a critical time for maternity services,” says Gill Walton, chief executive of the Royal College of Midwives. “[They] cannot be kept waiting because of a change at the top.”

With one in four women experiencing a negative birth experience, around 300,000 will have suffered harm during his tenure. “A health secretary who truly prioritised the lives, health and experiences of women and families would have jumped on the opportunity to take action, fund services properly and

prioritise running a safely staffed, non-discriminatory maternity service,” says birth educator and author Megan Rossiter. “Instead we have someone who’s stalled at every opportunity, reduced funding, and wasted money.”

To his credit, Streeting appears to have been genuinely moved by patient stories. Bereaved mother and maternity taskforce member Lauren Caulfield says he “really does care and did want to do good”, recalling him breaking down in tears during conversations with families. “He was willing to accept when he’d got it wrong and change his decisions,” she adds.



Streeting has shown he cares, but – in one campaigners words – has failed to enact ‘meaningful change’ (PA)

He also agreed to commission an independent review into around 1,000 maternity cases in Sussex after lobbying from families. Katie Fowler, whose daughter Abigail died as a result of the care she received in 2022, says she is “grateful” Streeting listened, but highlights how “it took two years of families sharing their worst experiences and fighting for him to finally see that it was the right and necessary thing to do”.

Campaigners fear there is a real danger that the appointment of another health secretary now – England’s sixth since the Covid-19 pandemic – will derail any progress. “If the new health

secretary will also require many months of convincing to take action, this is a setback we do not have time for,” Fowler adds.

Replacement health secretary James Murray may have little appetite to lead the maternity taskforce or act on the Amos report. Streeting certainly has a track record of not following others’ work: a plan to improve maternity care by his Conservative predecessor Victoria Atkins reportedly “went in the bin” after he was elected, while he has never implemented recommendations made in the 2024 Birth Trauma Inquiry report by then-Tory MP Theo Clarke – parliamentary insiders speculate he did not want to give her credit.

Streeting’s resignation reflects a broader pattern of women’s issues being deprioritised by the government. It comes after Jess Phillips quit her role as safeguarding minister, sharing how “real change” in tackling violence against women and girls typically only came after “threats made by me in light of catastrophic mistakes” – such as Starmer’s decision to hire Peter Mandelson despite being aware of his continued links to sex offender Jeffery Epstein.



Protesters taking part in a demonstration against the closure of their local A&E and maternity services at Lewisham Hospital in southeast London (PA)

Over his two years as health secretary, Streeting made several grand promises to improve women's healthcare, accepting women had been made to feel like "second-class citizens" by the NHS. While women in the UK live longer than men, they spend a greater proportion of their lives in poor health, and gynaecology waiting lists remain among the highest in the NHS. A King's College London study in 2024 found women are more likely to be denied pain relief, while a government review found eight out of 10 have had their concerns dismissed by medical professionals.

But his most decisive acts have been cuts: dropping ring-fenced funding for Women's Health Hubs (which aimed to ensure women could easily access services like cervical screening, contraception and menopause care in every region) and slashing budgets for improving maternity staffing and safety from £95m to just £2m in 2025/26.

When Streeting announced the landmark 10 Year Plan for the NHS in July 2025, it included barely any mention of specific policies targeted at women's health, save for the introduction of home-testing smear kits (a policy which is still to be implemented).

In scrapping targeted funding for Women's Health Hubs, he dismissed a key recommendation of the 2022 Women's Health Strategy. Launching a "renewed" version of that strategy last month, he said it would end the "gaslighting" and "medical misogyny" women face accessing healthcare. But it soon emerged that his Men's Health Strategy, launched five months earlier, had been allocated 60 per cent more new funding than the women's equivalent.

For all his rhetoric, women got very little from Streeting's tenure as health secretary – and not everyone is convinced he will represent their concerns if he lands the top job. As Rossiter puts it: "Streeting says all the right things, but what he provides is lip service, not meaningful change."

Section 2



ON THIS DAY



The US dropped its first hydrogen bomb over Bikini Atoll in the Pacific on this day in 1956 (Bettmann/Getty)

1498: Vasco da Gama arrived at Calicut, now called Kozhikode, in southern India, after discovering a route via the tip of southern Africa.

1506: Christopher Columbus, Genoese explorer, died in Valladolid, Spain.

1799: Honore de Balzac, French writer who produced 85 novels in 20 years, was born at Tours.

1840: York Minster was badly damaged by fire.

1867: The foundation stone of the Royal Albert Hall was laid.

1903: Kew Bridge over the river Thames was opened by Edward VII. Its real name is Edward VII Bridge.

1932: Amelia Earhart became the first woman to make a solo air crossing of the Atlantic.

1941: Germany began an aerial invasion of Crete.

1956: America dropped its first hydrogen bomb over Bikini Atoll in the Pacific.

1991: In the USSR, the government passed a new law allowing Soviet citizens to leave the country of their own free will.

On this day last year: Conservative councillor Ray Connolly said he was “heartbroken” after his wife Lucy’s appeal bid against her jail term for inciting racial hatred was dismissed, adding: “My wife has paid a very high price for making a mistake and today the court has shown her no mercy.”

Birthdays

Lynn Davies, Olympic gold medallist, 84; **Keith Fletcher**, cricket coach, 82; **Cher**, singer and actor, 80; **Greg Dyke**, former BBC director general, 79; **Nick Heyward**, singer, 65; **Owen Teale**, actor, 65; **Louis Theroux**, broadcaster, 56; **Josh O’Connor**, actor, 36.

BACK TO TOP ^



DIET COKE BREAKS

As worrying shortages of the soft drink are reported in India, **Lydia Spencer-Elliott** asks aluminium experts if Gen Z's beloved, 'fridge cigarette' could go missing from UK stores



No can do: shortages of the zero-calorie soda in India are due to fears over aluminium shortages linked to the Iran war (Coca-Cola)

When I told my housemate there was a Diet Cokes shortage, she almost fell to her knees. “Do not come to me with this news. I’ll go and protest. I’ll get arrested. My day is ruined. I’ll genuinely be insufferable to be around,” she screamed, clutching the side of the fridge.

In the hellscape of 2026, the drink of choice for many looking for that addictive boost at lunch before sending a flurry of fizz-fuelled emails is in danger. In recent weeks, reports have emerged that Diet Coke is vanishing from shelves across India as addicts start to stockpile the cans due to fears of an aluminium shortage linked to the Iran war disrupting supplies of the metal.

This shortage scare has seen the birth of a new social phenomenon across the country: “Diet Coke parties” where bars, influencers and restaurants charge punters an entry fee of around £12 to get access to their scarce supply of DC. At one event in Mumbai, the entry tickets doubled as raffle entries, with two winners taking home 50 cans of Diet Coke each.

Over here, unlike in India, Diet Coke is sold in plastic bottles, too. But ask anyone partial to a fridge cigarette – it just doesn’t hit the same when it’s not in an ice-cold can. Still, thankfully for my housemate and the thousands of women like her, shortages haven’t hit the UK – yet.

While Nadine Bloxsome, CEO of the UK’s Aluminium Federation, says we’re not “currently seeing evidence of an imminent aluminium shortage”, she acknowledges the UK is “more exposed than other countries” as we import the majority of our aluminium from other nations, which makes our supplies vulnerable to periods of geopolitical instability.

The Middle East has the capacity to produce seven million metric tonnes of aluminium every year, which equates to nine per cent of the world’s production capacity. Roughly 75 per cent of this is then exported and used elsewhere, Reuters reports. Take Russia out of the equation, due to sanctions over its Ukraine invasion, and this number continues to climb.



Poptastic: the drink has been trendy in fashion circles and among young people for years (Coca-Cola)

The metal comes from an auburn coloured mineral called bauxite. Refining and smelting it takes huge amounts of energy, hence why equipment is often located in regions like the Middle East, where they have the means to produce it. When Iran started limiting traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, plants in the Gulf began to struggle to import raw materials and export aluminium. Due to the uncertainty, smelters in Qatar and Bahrain shut down.

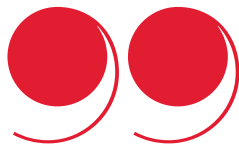
Then, in March there were Iranian airstrikes on two major Middle East producers and the Al Taweelah plant in Abu Dhabi, which was responsible for making 1.6 million tons of the metal last year, was entirely closed. Aluminium prices surged to a four-year high, with a benchmark on the London Metal Exchange (LME) recorded at \$3,672 (£2,721) in April.

Tom Giddings, executive director of the aluminium packaging recycling organisation Alupro, says this is “another example of why the UK should be building a local, resilient circular economy for key materials” and appeals to DC drinkers to use can-to-can recycling schemes like the Deposit Return Scheme (DRS), which is set to launch here next October, to “ensure we’re making the most of our own valuable materials” and not relying on others.



If elevated prices persist for a prolonged period, some additional costs will inevitably filter down to manufacturers and consumers

Nadine Bloxsome, CEO of the Aluminium Federation



All this goes to say that, while empty shelves haven't hit the UK yet, your Diet Coke habit – and other products you use in daily life (deodorant cans, some heartburn pills) – could be due to get pricier. “If elevated prices persist for a prolonged period, some additional costs will inevitably filter down to manufacturers and consumers,” Bloxsome says, making clear she doesn't anticipate a “widespread” shortage of aluminium packaged consumer goods.

“Producers, traders, and the wider supply chain remain relatively optimistic,” she assures from the World Aluminium Summit in London, while Donald Trump is over in China attempting to get President Xi Jinping to support him in pressuring Iran to reopen the Hormuz Strait. “The general view is that the industry is still functioning well, with contingency planning and diversified sourcing helping to maintain resilience,” she says.

But even in a best-case scenario where the war in Iran ends tomorrow, the aluminium plants in the Middle East won't reboot immediately. Smelters take time to warm up. “If the conflict were resolved quickly, pricing pressures would likely ease,” Bloxsome says, “Although supply chains and freight markets would still take time to fully stabilise.”



The real thing: the drink is available in plastic bottles, but fans say it isn't the same (Instagram/@kimkardashian)

The reaction of my housemate and no doubt many others reading the news might sound dramatic, but Diet Coke is more than just a mass-produced calorie-free soda – it's a cultural phenomenon. Most recently, in March, the fizz was named the official drink for *The Devil Wears Prada 2*.

It figures that Andy Sachs would sip a silver can while editing articles at *Runway*. Since 2025, Gen Z have dubbed the silver can a “fridge cigarette”, which takes the concept of a “Diet Coke break” – promoted to women most memorably in 1994 via an advert where a builder takes his top off for the girls during office elevenses – to new heights.

“The crack of a can is like the spark of a lighter,” Rachel Reno, a freelance creator who popularised the term in a viral video in 2025, told *The New York Times*, adding that, after the first syrupy sip of the sparkling bubbles, “all of the worries and cares in the world go away”.

But those worries might be here to stay. No matter how big a Diet Coke addict you are, most people aren't looking to buy industrial amounts of aluminium to satisfy their habit. But the longer the supplies of the material are disrupted and prices stay up, the likelier it is that consumer costs of canned drinks go up.

[BACK TO TOP](#) 

Section 2/ Ask Simon Calder



Why have business airfares risen by up to 100 per cent ?



The Middle East war has meant that some corporations are avoiding the Gulf hubs (Getty/iStock)

Q You talk about falling travel prices. I am a very regular business traveller and I see no evidence of falling fares. On the contrary, I am experiencing flight prices between 60 and 100 per cent of the fare I would normally expect. Talking to my colleagues, they are experiencing the same thing. What am I missing?

Tony P

A Since the Middle East conflict began, I have reported repeatedly on the soaring cost of aviation fuel and, counter-intuitively, falling air fares. But my focus has been on leisure travellers. The big airlines and holiday companies are reporting that many people are booking much closer to departure (and also switching to Spain and Portugal from the eastern Mediterranean).

With the summer season well underway, this is unsettling for the leisure-focused firms. Therefore, they are cutting prices to stimulate demand. A return trip I booked two weeks ago to Toulouse in June for £40 return has now fallen to £32. And package holidays with Tui from East Midlands to Rhodes and Newcastle to Crete in the next couple of weeks are available for barely £200 – a ridiculous price for flights, transfers and accommodation.

Yet by all accounts business travel from the UK is proceeding as strongly as ever – except for destinations in the Gulf, which are on the Foreign Office no-go list. Going east to Asia and Australasia, the unavailability of Gulf hubs to many business travellers (because of their employers' duty of care) has allowed other airlines to take advantage of a shift in demand, with resulting price hikes.

One agency says fares to the Philippines have trebled, and prices to other Asian nations are also high. Looking west, economy fares to the US are “soft” according to airlines and agents. Yet business demand remains strong.

Therefore, the fuel surcharges that carriers have applied to new bookings seem to be sticking, pushing up prices. BA's parent company, IAG, said it aims to pass on 60 per cent of increased fuel costs to passengers.

Returning to Europe: many business travellers like to use Heathrow, not least because of the strength of the British Airways loyalty scheme. With demand buoyant, fares are staying high. But for those happy to switch to other airports and airlines, some excellent deals are available – particularly on routes with a fair number of leisure passengers.

Email your question to s@hols.tv or tweet [@SimonCalder](https://twitter.com/SimonCalder)

BACK TO TOP 

Section 2/ Plane Talk

Here are your nominations for Europe's worst airport



Waiting game: Terminal 2 at Munich airport, which received multiple nominations as worst in Europe (Simon Calder)

SIMON CALDER

High Eurostar fares cause me to fly to and from Paris much more than I should; Air France's vast network means I connect at Paris Charles de Gaulle too. It is surely the most joyless airport journey in Europe? Globally, only New York JFK delivers a worse experience as an airport to start or end a journey. When I asked for views on dismal airports across Europe, Jaine

concurred: “I don’t like Heathrow Terminal 5 but, yes, CDG is weird.”

Yet the French hub – the busiest airport in Continental Europe – is not without supporters.

“Polycarpe” writes: “For point-to-point traffic it is far from the worst. Already has the sub-optimal RER B to downtown Paris and will have the CDG express from 2027 onwards. And one of the few major European hubs with a high-speed train station.” That last point is important: assuming you get through the EU entry-exit system after a journey from a British airport in less than an hour, being able to step aboard a TGV express to the east or south is a real bonus.

“Munich airport is pretty crap,” notes Nicole Graham. I have to agree. While it has an airport station, there is no high-speed link. Signposting is as far from intuitive as it is possible to be. And, as at Lufthansa’s other hub, Frankfurt, even connections between non-Schengen flights are fraught. Inbound from Seoul last year, connecting to Heathrow, the queue for security was so bad that I almost checked into Germany and out again to make the flight – until a kindly frontier official explained a shortcut.

While I had specified “major hubs” when canvassing views, some readers took the opportunity to nominate smaller airports. Maureen Myles cites Dalaman in Turkey “for the rip-off value duty-free”.

Tomas Ince emphasises his choice with an exclamation mark: “Geneva!” Anyone who has been there on a February half-term Saturday, when skiing Brits who have paid a vast amount for family trips are given a distinctly third-class experience, may agree.

Bordeaux, surprisingly, picked up three votes, with Rebecca judging it to be “the worst I’ve been to in recent years”. Like the airports of Marseille and Lisbon, it has a low-cost terminal only one up from an internment camp. The name, *Terminal billi*, signifies cheap – but not cheerful.

Someone writing as “An Ordinary Man” does not appreciate Manchester airport: “Needs bulldozing and starting again from scratch!” Some would argue that is exactly what is happening to the UK’s third-busiest airport (after Heathrow and Gatwick). A couple of votes came in specifically for Manchester’s Terminal 3. Recently it was the epitome of a no-frills facility. But now it is getting a comprehensive facelift.

Lanlan & Henry sum up the basic problem: “Most major European airports are terrible, because they have not been built to a kind of 50-year masterplan, but each new phase tacked on to what was there before.” That is certainly the case with Gatwick and Heathrow, respectively 90 and 80 years old this year.

Airports also have an unfortunate characteristic shared with hospitals and prisons: nobody wants to be there, and everyone wants to get out as soon as possible.

The difference is that people voluntarily go through airports. But unlike railway stations and ports, every traveller must undergo a thoroughly stressful security check (preceded, in the UK, by a drop-off fee of up to £10 if you arrive by road).

Airports are merely means to ends. While some of them feel as though they have been designed by sociopaths, they are staffed by helpful souls – and, in our tens of millions, we gladly judge that the rewards at the end of the journey justify the airport experience.

Paris Charles de Gaulle: I’ll be back.

BACK TO TOP [^](#)



PLATH'S CRIME POEMS

Sylvia Plath wrote some of the greatest verses in the English language on pink paper pads she had stolen from the college where she taught. Now a landmark publication has collected them together for the first time, writes **Jessie Thompson**



A new edition of the collected poems of Plath includes work written at the tender age of five (Granger/Shutterstock)

On a Monday evening in March 1958, the poet Sylvia Plath wrote herself a note for the morning: “Must be up early, to

laundry & steal more pink pads of paper tomorrow.”

At the time, she was working as a first-year English teacher at Smith College in Massachusetts, where she herself had studied, and where these “pink pads” were used for internal memos; she had been surreptitiously stockpiling them all month. “Have already robbed enough notebooks from the supply closet for one & ½ drafts of a 350 page novel,” she had written a week earlier, about the “pink, stiff, lovely-textured” pads that made the task of writing seem “finite, special, rose-cast”.

In 1962, living in England and running low on her talismanic paper, Plath wrote to an old Smith colleague, clamouring for more. “I have a fetish for them,” she said in her letter. “Do you think I could send a check to someone & buy a dozen of those pink pads??? My Muse is mad for them!”

She was yet to write the electrifying *Ariel* poems that would be published posthumously in 1965 and make her name as one of the greatest poets in modern literature after her suicide at the age of 30 in 1963. But the illicit “pink pads” would play their role in that work’s conception. After writing the first draft of *The Bell Jar* on them, her autobiographical coming-of-age novel about a young woman unravelling one summer in New York, she turned the pages over and wrote some of her most famous poems on the other side.

It was on this paper she drafted unforgettable works from the majestically furious “Daddy” to her tender ode to her sleeping baby son, “Nick and the Candlestick”. Those poems have now been printed countless times in countless editions, and this month they appear again in the very first edition of Plath’s complete poetic works, *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. Edited by scholars Amanda Golden and Karen V Kukil, It is a landmark publication that doubles the amount of material in the *Collected Poems* edited in 1981 by her husband Ted Hughes, which saw her posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize the following year.

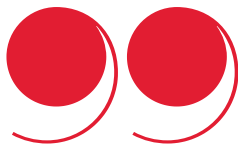
Coming in at a hefty 944 pages, the volume is divided into two halves, beginning with the decade of poetry for which she became best known, finishing with the writing she did as a child

and adolescent. The first is from 1937, when the famously precocious writer was just five; she'd publish her first poem at eight. It's possible to map some of Plath's literary fascinations from these early works; her interest in nature and the supernatural is already there in poems about fairies, trees and camping, written in 1943, aged 11. The innocence of poems like 1942's "My Teaparty" ("I had a little teaparty/ Three friends were invited;/ We had some milk, we had some cake/ And we were excited") belie Plath's writerly discipline and ear for rhythm and language.

Copious notes accompany the poems, and in the book's introduction, its editors fondly note Plath's affection for pink paper. "She always wanted to write a novel, but she was struggling and she was exhausted, so she started taking this pink paper and thought it would inspire her," explains Golden on why those "pink pads" seemed to hold so much power for the writer.



She always wanted to write a novel, but she was struggling and she was exhausted, so she started taking this pink paper and thought it would inspire her



"I think that it was also partly that it was official from her school, that it signified in some ways her success, that she was invited back there. So much of Plath's identity I think was bound up in being a good student. Even though she frees herself from that a bit, I think she took a lot of pride in being that student, and I

think it shaped very much her attention to detail and her thoroughness in her work.”

Plath excelled as a student at Smith, a prestigious women’s arts college, which she joined in 1951. But the events of one difficult summer, which saw her win a coveted internship at *Mademoiselle* magazine alongside several other women before experiencing a nervous breakdown and attempting suicide (and which Plath would write about in *The Bell Jar*), forced her to temporarily pause her studies to undergo psychiatric treatment. Today the college is home to Plath’s main archive – including those many sheafs of pink paper.

The year after graduating from Smith would change the course of Plath’s life: in 1956, studying at Cambridge on a Fulbright scholarship, she met the Yorkshire-born poet Ted Hughes. The couple would marry just three and a half months after meeting, forging a passionate creative partnership and having two children together, before the relationship ended in acrimony in 1962.

Previous editions of Plath’s work have not been without controversy, largely due to Hughes’ role, alongside his sister Olywn, as her literary executor. Some of Hughes’s editorial choices have become notorious, from his reordering of her *Ariel* poems from the original arrangement Plath left behind after her death, to the fact that he chose to only include work in the *Collected Poems* from 1956 onwards – the year that she had met him. In the latest edition, the first half of the book begins in 1953, when Plath was still at Smith, a time when Golden and Kukil say she was having work accepted in “publications with a larger audience and more prestige in America”. Hughes died from cancer in 1998 at the age of 68, just months after publishing his final collection *Birthday Letters*, a series of poems about his life with Plath and the impact of her death.

“We set it back a little bit further, but I think the impulse is somewhat similar,” says Golden. “It’s trying to start it at a date when she had reached a certain point as a poet, where the work was progressing, and you could make some distinction between what came before and that point. We didn’t want to present all

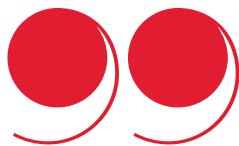
the poems as of the same quality. We wanted to show an evolution.”

The main distinction between this publication and Hughes’s earlier version, says Golden, is that she and Kukil were able to work with “a lot more information” than Ted and Olwyn.

“There’s a lot more that’s come to light in the past 40 years. Archives have been established, books and collections have been published, and in the course of editing those collections, a lot of poems surfaced that were in archives, that [Ted and Olwyn Hughes] didn’t have.”



There’s a lot more that’s come to light in the past 40 years



Readers of *The Poems of Sylvia Plath* will be able to see how Plath painstakingly typed out lists of the work she had submitted to magazines and poetry journals – also on her beloved pink paper. On these fastidious records, she would keep track of acceptances and rejections, just as she did for Hughes and his poetry. The new collection also includes lists of subjects written out by Ted Hughes, that she would annotate with poems she had composed in response. “It was part of their creative synergy – he came up with ideas,” says Golden. “I think he was brainstorming with and for her.”

It was in 1958 that Plath had her first poems accepted in *The New Yorker* after years of snubs. She would go on to be published in *The Atlantic*, *The New Statesman* and *The Observer* and to read her poems on the BBC, publishing her debut

collection *The Colossus* in 1960. Publication was important to Plath, not just because towards the end of her life she was a single mother who needed to make money from her writing, but in terms of “developing a professional identity”, says Golden.

“The idea that she is part of something larger I think is important,” she adds. “That her work was accepted and acknowledged as being of a certain quality. And a chance to keep going, too – to develop this voice and this profession.”

For Plath watchers, though, there can hardly be a more enticing idea than the prospect of the recovery of lost works. As the new edition attests, she wrote prolifically, even given her short life. She wrote two further novels, one of which she destroyed, another of which has gone missing – not to mention her final journal, which Hughes admitted to destroying, to no small amount of opprobrium. In terms of Plath’s poetry at least, Golden believes there could still be more work out there to be found.

“There’s always materials that were sent out for publication and not returned, and they often surface in publishers’ archives,” she says. “So I think things will continue to surface.”

‘The Poems of Sylvia Plath’ is published by Faber

BACK TO TOP ▲



STAR BORES

Pedro Pascal and Jeremy Allen White can't save the painfully dull 'The Mandalorian and Grogu', writes **Clarisse Loughrey**



Mask of sorrow: Pedro Pascal's Mandalorian, accompanied by his alien pal Grogu, in the new 'Star Wars' movie (Photos Disney)

★★☆☆☆

How many nails can we realistically drive into Star Wars's coffin before it's time to give up hope of resuscitation? Seven years have passed since *The Rise of Skywalker*'s feeble, conciliatory end to the sequel trilogy and the franchise's subsequent shift to the small screen (sometimes excellent like *Andor*, sometimes

bland like the *Obi-Wan Kenobi* mini-series). Any return to the multiplex, you would think, should feel declarative, maybe even bold.

Instead, *The Mandalorian and Grogu* merely stitches together what is clearly three episodes of the previously planned fourth season of *The Mandalorian* and calls it a day. There's not a whiff of effort here. As a mid-season arc for the character of "Pedro Pascal's sultry voice inside a metal bucket" and his tiny, puppet son, this might have been adequate, if uninspired. As a so-called feature film event, blown up to Imax with Sigourney Weaver roped in to deliver a few lines, it's the dulllest and most inconsequential Star Wars film ever made.

The franchise was at least on to something when they first introduced Pascal's Din Djarin in 2019 as an emotionally stifled bounty hunter working paycheck to paycheck, with no real moral compass beyond the ascetic principles drilled into him by the Mandalorian cult that raised him (in short, the helmet stays *on*). It's a tale as old as time, but it was charming still to see that stone-cold heart melt in the face of a 60-year-old, gurgling, Yoda-adjacent infant.

All that character development is now firmly in the past, and the film never even bothers to check in on Katee Sackhoff's Mandalorian leader Bo-Katan Kryze, or any of the other people the series repeatedly told us were an integral part of this character's world.

In *The Mandalorian and Grogu*, the first character of the title exists solely to feed the second character of the title snacks. When Din's helmet is ripped off so audiences can receive their court-ordered five minutes of Pascal's famous face, the fact that he's once more violated his own principles bears zero narrative weight because there's no one around to care this time.



'A looksmaxxed, gym bro space slug': Rotta the Hutt, voiced by Jeremy Allen White

Perhaps the film could have outweighed that lack of consequence with a breathless, old-school space adventure – only director Jon Favreau and his co-writers, Dave Filoni and Noah Kloor, have been tethered so long to the small screen that they've lost nearly all sense of what cinematic scale and pace should look like. Din and Grogu, now contracted by the New Republic to sniff out the last remnants of the Empire (the series and film take place between the original and sequel trilogies), are ordered by Weaver's Colonel Ward to travel to the planet of Shakari to seek out a kidnapped asset.

Shakari is such a lifelessly imagined 1:1 of New York City that the first alien they meet, a four-armed Ardennian deli owner, is voiced by Martin Scorsese. There, Din encounters Rotta the Hutt, son of deceased crime lord Jabba (of “being choked to death by Carrie Fisher” fame). He's a looksmaxxed, gym bro space slug who, instead of speaking in the species's distinct, guttural tones, is now just *The Bear's* Jeremy Allen White reading these lines for what feels like the first time in his life. It's a completely dispirited performance, and an awkward contrast to Pascal's work, which still maintains that ice-cold, charismatic edge where it can.

While the first season of *The Mandalorian* did well to *Star Wars*-ise western genre tropes – with Ludwig Göransson’s synths, each cascading note sharpened to a blade’s edge, doing much of the heavy work there and here – *The Mandalorian and Grogu* feels comparatively bored by its own allusions to gangster cinema. A smooth-talking kingpin hides away in a luxury compound that looks like a big Tesco, while the later emergence of a deadly hitman is merely a CGI replica of a character from Filoni’s own animated *Clone Wars* stories (as is Rotta).

And as much as little Grogu, with his fuzzy, twitchy ears and chubby-cheeked smile, remains a slam dunk on the cuteness scale, Favreau has reduced him here more to strategy than character – something to cut to when the characters have run out of things to say. What ingenuity there is in the practical puppet work is undercut by how often, and jarringly so, they force him to interact with fully CGI characters. With *The Mandalorian and Grogu*, *Star Wars* has lost all sense of wonder.

Dir: Jon Favreau. Starring: Pedro Pascal, Jeremy Allen White, Brendan Wayne, Lateef Crowder, Sigourney Weaver. Cert 12A, 132 minutes.

In cinemas from 22 May

BACK TO TOP ▲



Business news in brief



Greene King is selling its entire Old Speckled Hen family of beers to Damm UK (Greene King)

Greene King to sell Old Speckled Hen brands

Greene King has agreed to sell its popular Old Speckled Hen brand to Damm UK, the owner of Estrella Damm. The significant deal is expected to lead to the long-term closure of the Westgate Brewery in Bury St Edmunds, although Greene King is concurrently developing a new site within the town.

Damm UK, the British arm of Spanish brewer SA Damm, will acquire the entire Old Speckled Hen family of beers and will initially continue at the Westgate Brewery. However, production will subsequently be relocated to Damm's recently constructed

brewery in Bedford, ultimately resulting in the Westgate facility's closure.

Suffolk-based Greene King said it will move away from producing beer for the off trade – the industry term used for retailers including supermarkets. It will continue to make cask ale and craft beer, including Greene King IPA and Abbot Ale but will focus on selling these in pub venues.

Monzo profits leap by 44%

Monzo has reported a 44 per cent leap in its annual profits after the digital bank generated more money from lending and cashed in on subscriptions.

The bank, which was launched 11 years ago as a challenger to high street banking, said millions more customers joined in the past year. It reported a pre-tax profit of £87.3m for the year to the end of March, up 44 per cent on the £60.5m made the year before. Total revenues jumped by 39 per cent to £1.7bn, partly driven by a 39 per cent year-on-year increase in lending income.

The bank's total customer base has reached 15.2 million, making it the seventh largest in the UK by customer numbers. The bank's latest annual report revealed that the highest-paid director, understood to be the former chief executive, TS Anil, took home a pay packet worth £3.5m last year; he was replaced earlier this year by former Google executive Diana Layfield.

UK unemployment rate rises to 5%

Britain's unemployment rate has climbed, while job vacancies have plummeted to their lowest level in five years, as firms are squeezed by the impact of the Iran war.

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) revealed that the jobless rate rose to 5 per cent in the three months to March, an increase from 4.9 per cent in the preceding three-month period; the uptick defied the prediction of most economists, who had anticipated that the rate would remain stable.

The ONS also estimated a sharp decline of 100,000 workers on UK payrolls during April, bringing the total to 30.2 million – the largest monthly fall since May 2020, at the height of the Covid pandemic. Meanwhile, the number of vacancies decreased by 28,000 to 705,000, the lowest level since 2021. Retail and hospitality firms saw some of the largest falls in payroll numbers and vacancies.

Currys beats profit guidance

Currys said it has beaten profit guidance for the past year after “very solid” recent trading. Departing boss Alex Baldock said the retailer “finished a good year well” following strong performances in the UK and Ireland and in its Nordics region.

Like-for-like sales grew by 4 per cent over the year to 2 May, compared to a year earlier, while pre-tax profits lifted by 18 per cent to £191m. It said its UK operations have been boosted by growing demand for its services, its business-to-business operations and new categories.

Currys also reported 18 per cent growth in subscribers across its iD Mobile business. The update comes two months after Mr Baldock revealed plans to leave the company after eight years in the top job; he will take over as the chief executive of Boots later this year.

[BACK TO TOP ^](#)



One crucial intervention helped turn the title race

Midfielder Eberechi Eze was brave enough to have a word with Arsenal's head coach Mikel Arteta, says **Miguel Delaney**



Arteta can finally smile after overcoming some late hurdles in the season (PA)

As Mikel Arteta finally gets to savour the moment, he will be repeating a few words he couldn't help ruminate on throughout the season. "Twenty-two years," he'd say to anyone listening. "Twenty-two years. It's far too long for a club like Arsenal."

And now, after so much angst and frustration from the length of that very wait, Arteta and his squad can at last say it's over. On Sunday, he will lift the Premier League trophy, the club's first title since 2004 and 14th in all.

The Basque, for his part, was more conscious than anyone of the effects of that wait. He could sense it through the season, that sudden danger when everything looked like slipping away in the manner that so many people expected.

If there has been one great virtue of Arsenal's campaign, it is how Arteta has managed that; how he ensured the team stayed in *control*.

That was occasionally rather fragile. There were at least four major moments of emotional crisis, when Arteta felt he had to intervene. The trick was always to get the players to look at it from a new perspective, to remember they'd rather be in this situation than not.

It is testament to their resilience, which was so often doubted.

And yet there was a crucial moment when one of the players had to get Arteta himself to look at it all anew.



Kai Havertz scored the only goal of the game to beat Burnley (Getty)

The days after the 2-1 home defeat to Bournemouth were probably the worst of the campaign, all the more so because it

was before that huge trip to Manchester City that had been weighing over the team for months; the great nemesis that had to be overcome.

A growing problem at that point was not just psychological, though. It was physical. Arsenal's players looked and felt exhausted.

That was partly because of the schedule, but also Arteta's own training demands. The Basque's response to any setback was to work even harder on the training ground. It was an ethic that could be construed as admirable in other circumstances, but not with finely tuned athletes. The effects could be seen in the injury crises endured every April.

So, Eberechi Eze, one of the newer players who was also among the most laid-back, went up to his boss. In so many words, he told Arteta, *we can do this, but we need a bit of space*.

The manager listened.



Eberechi Eze intervened to lighten Arsenal's training load (Reuters)

Days off were increased. The intensity of training sessions was lightened. In the week before they claimed the title, he gave them three days off followed by a barbecue.

At the training ground, Arteta also insisted on “cutting out all the noise” by turning off any sports channels or news. They were replaced by music from the 90s and early 2000s – coincidentally, when they were last winning leagues.

These might sound like mundane details but they are genuinely the unseen elements that make the difference between reclaiming such titles and not.

That’s especially true when you play as deep “within the margins” as Arsenal.

There is of course a bigger debate to be had about the aesthetics and style of the new champions, as well as the wider influence on the game.

The story is still ultimately one of control, though, of a manager seeking to maximise the effect of everything at his disposal.

That might not have always felt true in terms of the expansiveness of attack, but it ensured that Arsenal were the most rounded team in the game. And hence, the new champions.

It also plays into a theme that isn’t too popular given the general debate around Arsenal, but remains emphatically true: this is still a story of overperformance; of beating a much wealthier opponent through careful planning and strategy. City’s wage bill from the last accounts was still £80m more than Arsenal’s – in other words, five Bukayo Sakas.

That depth has an effect, so Arteta had to cut his cloth in different ways.



Mikel Arteta steered his team through challenging times (PA Wire)

He sat with the then football leadership of Tim Lewis and Andrea Berta and devised ways to achieve advantages, both in play and in squad profile.

It was from this that the focus on set-pieces and physical robustness came. Arteta could see which way the game was evolving, and admittedly furthered it. Oleksandr Zinchenko was moved on because he didn't have that size.

The new approach could also be seen from the summer business.

Arteta has gone into some deep places after previous second-place finishes – bad memories which make this all the more of a release – but such lows usually evolved into the manager deeply thinking about what could be improved.

The most obvious one from 2024-25 was squad depth, and the effect of injuries. Aware of how demanding the new calendar was, Arteta realised he needed back-up in every position.

There was a brief early consideration over whether they should just get Alexander Isak, and the outline of a potential package was presented to them. Arteta did love the Swede.

It was just too much money for a forward of whom there were doubts over his ability to sustain performance in two-game

weeks. That decision was ultimately vindicated.



Viktor Gyokeres has scored 21 times for Arsenal so far this season (PA Wire)

It also afforded Arteta another advantage that he always longed for. That was to be able to go to a game with the opposition having no idea what configuration of players he would use.

Hence he would always play games around injuries, often instructing club media not to mention or photograph returning players.

For all the devices, though, this title victory was ultimately about thinking about everything as deeply as possible; of seeking to “control every element of a game”, according to one source. That even extended to training at the Emirates pitch so they could use the stands to get their pressing lines right.

Arteta is described as “a probabilities guy” and he essentially knew that if Arsenal created around 2.0 xG a game while keeping the opposition down to 0.5 and keeping clean sheets, while being able to score set-pieces, they would go some way to securing the points needed to win the title.

All of that did feed into a campaign that often felt methodical, even laborious. There were only brief moments when Arsenal had the spark of 2022-23. Those defending Arteta would say he did what he needed.

And yet, amid so much process, there were still some key moments when the team just had to produce.

One was the late 2-1 comeback away to Newcastle United at the end of September, which many of the squad felt was crucial in setting a marker. It also set a tone in Gabriel scoring the winner from a set-piece. That would happen again.

Another was the 4-1 victory over Aston Villa at Christmas, which Arteta felt produced their best spell of football of the entire season. The players were even singing “set-piece again, ole ole” in the dressing room.



Arsenal's Martin Zubimendi celebrates scoring the second goal against Aston Villa (PA Wire)

The 4-0 win away at Leeds United was crucial in settling nerves after the 3-2 home defeat to Manchester United, with the 4-1 win at Tottenham Hotspur having the same effect after the shock 2-2 draw at Wolves.

Throughout all of this, there was a sense of some players being too concerned with the noise around them. Opposition players even spoke of noticing that tension while insiders themselves saw how Arsenal were visibly more relaxed in the Champions League.

Arteta's staff would insist that was also partly because of how competitive the Premier League had become.

Every game was a battle, compounded by how war-weary Arsenal were becoming. They probably should have gone clear multiple points through late winter and spring.

By mid-April, when the effects of Max Dowman's breakthrough goal against Everton had worn off, they were really feeling it.

They were exhausted. Injuries were mounting. Martin Zubimendi, signed specifically for that control, looked exhausted.

So, Arteta took Eze's message on board.

It came at a crucial moment, just before the City game was out of the way. If there were obviously some key victories over the course of the season, this was an influential defeat.

The worst had happened in losing 2-1 but it hadn't happened in the worst way. There was even a sense that City had celebrated that victory too much. Arsenal felt emboldened, and encouraged. Declan Rice's line, "this is not over", was not – well – just a line.



Arsenal fans' long wait for a Premier League title is at an end (Getty)

They believed again. The Champions League run helped.

So did Arteta's willingness to go with momentum.

He could see that Myles Lewis-Skelly was working hard and felt he could use that energy. There was a release.

Suddenly, players were back.

They still weren't exactly motoring, but they were getting through.

Key players were coming back. By the win over Burnley, Arteta had almost a full squad.

They went through the full range of characteristics: another set-piece goal, a 1-0, a VAR controversy – but crucially not a “bottling”.

That accusation could instead be levelled at City, given the momentum shifting 3-3 draw at Everton.

Arteta had instead restored in Arsenal a resilience, and a self-respect.

They're a serious team again. And they're champions again.

BACK TO TOP 



Spurs squander significant chance to avoid relegation

Chelsea

Fernandez (18), Santos (67)

2

Tottenham Hotspur

Richarlison (74)

1



Blues celebrate after blocking a late shot from James Maddison last night (Reuters)

Tottenham's fight to avoid relegation from the Premier League will go to the final day of the season after they were beaten 2-1 by Chelsea at Stamford Bridge to hand 18th-place West Ham a lifeline.

A point in southwest London would have put an end to the Spurs nightmare that still threatens to pull them into the second tier for the first time in 48 years but they succumbed to familiar frailties, Enzo Fernandez and Andrey Santos scoring in each half for the Blues in entirely avoidable circumstances for Roberto De Zerbi's side.

Richarlison got one back 16 minutes from the end to offer late hope and give the signal for a hugely tense finish, the jeopardy felt by home fans at potentially being denied a role in sending Spurs down igniting the atmosphere.



Richarlison's goal was not enough to ensure survival for Tottenham (Reuters)

It was the most rambunctious noise they had generated here all season in support of their team, understandably following the coup this week of landing Xabi Alonso as the club's new manager, though there was plainly a delight in seeing their great rivals pushed possibly to within a defeat of the drop.

Chelsea fans never missed a beat all night in reminding Spurs of what may await them come Sunday, and next season.

It was a first Blues victory in the league since 4 March but the real winners here were West Ham. A victory for Nuno Espirito Santo's team at home to Leeds coupled with a Spurs loss to Everton and the Hammers will be safe.

Tottenham needed a fast start to quieten an unusually boisterous crowd and they almost got it, Pedro Porro's flighted ball into the box, and Mathys Tel's flying header whacked the base of the post.

The opening goal was a mix of Chelsea brilliance and an abdication of responsibility in Spurs' defence. Pedro Neto found Fernandez in an acre of room in midfield. No one in yellow made a move and from fully 30 yards the World Cup winner fired Chelsea into the lead.



Enzo Fernandez brilliantly fired Chelsea into the lead (PA Wire)

It was his 14th of the season and he might have had another straight away but thudded the angle of post and bar from a free-kick way out near the touchline.

When Randal Kolo Muani spooned a cross horribly out of play, home fans responded with taunts of "that's why you're going down". Cole Palmer came within an inch of making it two with a

low drive on the stroke of half-time, lending those words an ominous ring.

Spurs grew into the game in the second half, with more possession and more of it around Chelsea's penalty area. It was then entirely in keeping with the unfolding disaster of their season that they threw away another goal and with it hopes of securing survival on the night.



Andrey Santos on his way to scoring Chelsea's second goal (Reuters)

Kolo Muani played a pass to no one in midfield, Palmer took charge of the loose ball and clipped it up to Fernandez who knocked it across goal to the unmarked Santos for 2-0.

Pape Sarr came off the bench and immediately put a flicker of life back into his side, back-heeling to Richarlison who showed rare alertness to prod it past Sanchez.

James Maddison, another substitute, had the chance to seal Spurs' survival seven minutes from the end but was denied brilliantly by Jorrel Hato.

PA



Southampton kicked out of play-off final over spying



Middlesbrough caught a performance-analysis intern filming from behind a tree (Social media)

RICHARD JOLLY

SENIOR FOOTBALL CORRESPONDENT

Southampton have been expelled from the Championship play-offs for spying, and Middlesbrough will now face Hull City in the final at Wembley on Saturday.

Southampton, who had beaten Boro 2-1 on aggregate in the semi-finals, admitted multiple breaches of Football League regulations and said they were guilty of unauthorised filming of

other clubs' training sessions. An independent disciplinary commission has also given Southampton a four-point deduction, which will apply to next season's Championship.



Southampton have been punished by the English Football League (PA)

Middlesbrough, who had called for Southampton to be thrown out of the play-offs after catching a performance-analysis intern filming from behind a tree, got their wish. Kim Hellberg's side have continued training since their 2-1 defeat at St Mary's last week so that they would be ready in case they were readmitted to the play-offs.

"Middlesbrough Football Club welcomes the outcome of today's Disciplinary Commission hearing," a statement said. "We believe this sends out a clear message for the future of our game regarding sporting integrity and conduct. As a club, we are now focused on our game against Hull City at Wembley on Saturday.

Boro had inferred that Southampton had also spied on other clubs, and Saints admitted they had done it for two other games – December's 2-1 defeat to Oxford and April's 2-2 draw against Ipswich.



Middlesbrough will now face Hull in the Championship play-off final (Reuters)

Southampton have the right to appeal against the decision – as do the EFL – but were found guilty of breaching EFL Regulation 3.4, which requires clubs to act towards each other with the utmost good faith, and EFL Regulation 127, which forbids clubs from observing other clubs’ training within 72 hours of a match.

Regulation 127 was introduced after Leeds admitted spying on Derby’s training sessions in 2019. They were punished with a £200,000 fine, which manager Marcelo Bielsa paid himself.

The EFL had made contingency plans for the play-off final in case it did not go ahead on Saturday, but has now confirmed it will – but with Middlesbrough, who finished fifth in the Championship, facing Hull, who beat Millwall in their semi-final.

BACK TO TOP ^



The other side of Pep that complicates his City legacy

Catalan has inspired a dynasty, but his choice of institution at which to do so provokes questions, writes **Miguel Delaney**



Pep Guardiola is expected to leave Manchester City at the end of the season (PA)

When other coaches are asked about Pep Guardiola, and almost invariably describe him as the game's greatest manager, there's usually one common compliment. The Catalan made them think

about things they didn't expect. He comes up with plays and tactics they couldn't have imagined.

On the whole, in perhaps the best eulogy for Guardiola, he's turned football thinking on its head. And while these kinds of discussions are nebulous and subjective, it is from all that Guardiola clearly has a claim to being the greatest manager of all time.

First of all, there are the numbers at Manchester City alone, to go with what he did at Barcelona and Bayern Munich: six Premier League titles so far, one Champions League, three FA Cups and five Carabao Cups at City, to go with three Spanish titles, three German titles, another two Champions Leagues and four other domestic cups. And that over an impressively sustained 15 years.

In terms of pure trophies, that already makes him one of the most relentlessly successful coaches ever, but more relevant might be the reason for all that. Guardiola has an almost undeniable claim to be the most influential manager ever. Football is largely played the way it is in 2026 because of him. Never has one coach's influence been so profound, not even Rinus Michels or Johan Cruyff. In reinterpreting their principles for the modern age, Guardiola has also benefited from all the advantages of that modern age to spread his football everywhere.



Guardiola has turned football thinking on its head (Reuters)

All modern pressing systems ultimately come from him. All modern play comes from him. Guardiola's positional game has become *the* tactical hegemony in a way no ideology has before, and for such an extended period. Through that, in maybe his greatest victory given the discussion when he arrived at City in 2016, there's Guardiola's effect on English football.

Remember “what is tackles?” after another calamitous four-goal defeat, this time at Leicester City, which begged more questions about whether his football was possible in the Premier League? What was the concern? Guardiola's team evaded tackles, and changed English football in two ways.

One is heard in the now common refrain about how everyone plays out from the back, and all the other trappings of his “positional game”. The other is in making the famously competitive Premier League look something like the Bundesliga or Ligue 1.

With feats such as 100-point campaigns, four successive titles and a domestic treble, Guardiola achieved a dominance England has never seen – not even with Sir Alex Ferguson. City's Abu Dhabi ownership more than got its money's worth. And it is from all of that there is – rather fittingly – another way to think about Guardiola.



Guardiola has won six Premier League titles with Manchester City (Reuters)

Of course his football was going to be possible in England, because City responded to the travails of 2016-17 by going out and spending a quarter of a billion. It forms the one purely football caveat in Guardiola's sensational record. He's never really had to work anywhere where he's had to compromise. He's always worked at a country's greatest power, be that in terms of the squad at Barcelona or pure finance.

That is of course largely to his credit, because he immediately got to the top and stayed there, in a way even his greatest peers ultimately struggle with. Nobody just keeps winning like that. As such, it's not a case of winning because of resources but rather how resources amplified his own talent. The greatest manager was afforded the most ideal possible settings, everything catered to him.

It also means, however, he's never had a defiant achievement like Sir Alex Ferguson winning with Aberdeen or Jose Mourinho with FC Porto. Even those yet to join those titans of management, such as Mikel Arteta, restored a club in a way Guardiola never has. And if that makes his career a touch incomplete, in not having that classic manager rise, it's also important as regards honing your approach.

Guardiola's football takes deeply integrated synchronicity, but that's a lot harder to achieve if you're at a club where your main centre-back is suddenly out for three months and you don't have the depth to cover. Look at the comparable Luis Enrique in relative struggles at Celta Vigo and Roma. Would a touch more honing have allowed Guardiola another Champions League, the one trophy return that looks a little thin on his CV?



City celebrate winning the FA Cup last Saturday (Reuters)

There's also another dimension with City, beyond the resources. There's the politics, a subject that Guardiola himself has invited discussion on. City are not just the most lavishly funded football project in history, but also a "sportswashing" project – a vehicle for the projection of the power of Abu Dhabi and the United Arab Emirates, with all of that entails, including a questionable human rights record and now mounting evidence that it is backing the Rapid Support Forces in a campaign in Sudan that a UN fact-finding mission described as "carrying the hallmarks of genocide".

Human rights organisation Fair Square even called on the UK's Foreign Office to investigate City's named owner Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the deputy prime minister of the UAE. The body did not receive a response from City or the UAE embassy. Abu Dhabi have otherwise expressed outraged innocence to the wider claims.

It is to all this that Guardiola, one of the most celebrated football figures in history, has lent his halo; his reputational glow. And while players and managers are generally given a pass for such choices due to how short their careers are and how complex the industry now is beyond the pitch, there are two differences with Guardiola.

One is how intertwined his identity has been with the entire project, as if the ownership were trying to appropriate a place in the most celebrated football lineage of all. Another is how avowedly political he is. Guardiola has laudably spoken about Palestine, but has he considered the role of Abu Dhabi and the UAE in that crisis, not least in their own relationship with Israel?



Consciously or not, Guardiola has allowed his reputation to legitimise a questionable geopolitical project (PA)

It was similar in 2018 when he creditably wore a yellow ribbon in support of Catalan independence leaders and spoke about political freedoms on “humanity”. On being asked how he squared that with gratitude to Sheikh Mansour, a leader in a country “criticised for not respecting freedoms”, Guardiola gave a garbled answer about how “every country decides the way they want to live for themselves”. That had echoes of when he was doing ambassadorial work for Qatar 2022 and said the state had

“all the freedoms of the world, within the frame that the government gives them”.

The wider point is that Guardiola could have gone anywhere. He chose this. Whether conscious or not, he allowed his football reputation to legitimise a highly questionable geopolitical project. While such descriptions usually receive storms of backlash, especially at a moment when someone is being celebrated, these are the big, important themes that the game should absolutely concern itself with.

Looming over the majority of Guardiola’s time at the club has been the Premier League investigation into City – the initial Football Leaks that prompted it all came out in November 2018. Most of the charges do not relate to his time at the club, but if guilt were proven, a key point would be that you can’t just cleanly separate one era from another; they’re interlinked.

More pointedly, and absurdly for English football, most of Guardiola’s success has come while a huge investigation has been in progress. City insist on their innocence. Whatever the outcome, Guardiola is now not likely to be around to discuss it.

He’s finally leaving, his football record greatly enhanced. He’s also done similar for the reputation of Abu Dhabi’s football project. There are, fittingly, two ways to think about Guardiola.

BACK TO TOP [^](#)



Alcaraz to miss Wimbledon as injury problems persist



Carlos Alcaraz during his defeat by Jannik Sinner in the 2025 Wimbledon final (PA)

ALEX PATTLE

Carlos Alcaraz has pulled out of Wimbledon due to injury, following his withdrawal from the French Open.

Alcaraz announced the news on social media yesterday. He will also miss Queen's, the London grass-court tournament that many players use as a warm-up for Wimbledon. The update

follows news in April that the Spaniard would not compete at the French Open in Paris, which began this week, due to a wrist problem.

“My recovery is going well and I feel much better, but unfortunately I’m still not ready to be able to play,” Alcaraz wrote yesterday. “And that’s why I have to withdraw from the grass-court swing at Queen’s and Wimbledon. They are two really special tournaments for me and I’ll miss them a lot. We keep working to return as soon as possible!”

Alcaraz is a two-time champion at Wimbledon, having beaten Novak Djokovic in the 2023 and 2024 finals. The 23-year-old finished runner-up to Jannik Sinner last year. Alcaraz, a former world No 1 who is currently ranked No 2, is also a two-time champion at Queen’s. He lifted the trophy there in 2023 and 2025.



Alcaraz with the Wimbledon trophy in 2024 (Getty)

Alcaraz’s withdrawal from Wimbledon leaves Sinner the heavy favourite to win the grass-court major, just as the Italian is on the clay of the French Open. Sinner, 24, said he was “sad” to learn of Alcaraz’s withdrawal from Roland Garros in April, but that news – and yesterday’s – gives the world No 1 a great chance of taking his grand slam haul from four to six in the coming months.

Before beating Alcaraz at SW19 last summer, Sinner narrowly lost to the Spaniard in an all-time classic French Open final. The rivals met again in the final of the US Open, where Alcaraz triumphed.

Alcaraz also won the Australian Open in January, beating Djokovic in the final after the Serb overcame Sinner in a scintillating semi-final. The Spaniard's victory in Melbourne made him a seven-time major champion, but he will have to wait until the US Open in September at the earliest to add to that tally.

Alcaraz's last competitive outing on court was in Barcelona in April, where he was beaten by Tomas Machac in the round of 16. Before that, "Carlitos" was defeated by Sinner in the final of the Monte Carlo Masters. Both tournaments are played on clay.

BACK TO TOP [^](#)



Sports news in brief



Pep Guardiola and Manchester City players applaud fans at the Vitality Stadium last night (PA)

Cherries spoil City title chase with draw

Second-placed Manchester City were held to a 1-1 draw by Bournemouth last night. The result came amid reports manager Pep Guardiola will step down at the end of the season. City needed to win at Vitality Stadium to take the title race to the final day.

Erling Haaland equalised in added time to cancel out Junior Kroupi's record-breaking 13th top-flight goal of the campaign but the visitors were unable to force a winner as Guardiola was denied a potential fairytale farewell.

Bournemouth's historic achievement was a fitting way to mark the final home game of head coach Andoni Iraola, who was given a rousing send-off at full-time ahead of being replaced by Marco Rose in the summer.

Stewart out of wilderness and into Scotland World Cup squad

Southampton striker Ross Stewart has emerged from four years in the international wilderness to earn a surprise call-up to Scotland's first World Cup squad since 1998. Steve Clarke's 26-man group was largely as expected but 29-year-old Saints striker Stewart – whose only two previous appearances for the national side came back in 2022 – got the nod up front, despite clamour for the likes of Oli McBurnie, Oliver Burke and Kieron Bowie to be included.

Stewart has scored 10 goals in his last 21 games for Southampton to help fire them to the Championship play-off final – though they have now been thrown out of that for spying on a Middlesbrough training session – and he joins Che Adams, Lyndon Dykes, Lawrence Shankland and George Hirst as the striking options.

Rangers's 19-year-old winger Findlay Curtis, who has been on loan with Kilmarnock this term, makes the squad after winning his first cap against Japan in March, while Bournemouth's Ben Gannon-Doak is deemed to have recovered sufficiently from a hamstringing injury to get the call-up. The Udinese midfielder Lennon Miller narrowly misses out, with John McGinn, Kenny McLean, Scott McTominay, Billy Gilmour, Lewis Ferguson and Ryan Christie forming a strong midfield selection, along with wingers Curtis and Gannon-Doak.

Boost for Lionesses as Toone returns from injury

England manager Sarina Wiegman has expressed optimism regarding Ella Toone's potential impact in the Lionesses' crucial Women's World Cup qualifiers next month, as the team looks to secure their place at next year's tournament. The Manchester

United midfielder returns to the national squad for the first time since November, having recovered from a hip injury that sidelined her for the latter half of the season.

Despite her recent absence, Wiegman indicated that Toone “looks good” and expects her to be involved as England seek to seal qualification with at least a draw against Spain in Majorca on 5 June. “It’s nice she is back, and of course she’s called up, so it’s good to have that option in midfield,” Wiegman stated.

She added a note of caution about playing time: “We haven’t made decisions on the starting lineups and minutes yet, and I know for a lot of players it’s the end of the season now, and also some players are still playing, but I don’t know. We have to see her in our environment. What I’ve seen looks good. Can she play 90 minutes at the highest level? I don’t know, but I know she can play.”

England complete revamp of Borthwick’s coaching staff

Byron McGuigan will join England’s staff on a permanent basis from this summer to complete the revamp of Steve Borthwick’s coaching group. Former Scotland winger McGuigan, 36, initially joined Borthwick’s team for last summer’s tour of Argentina and the US while continuing his main role as defence coach at Sale Sharks.

That agreement was extended through the Autumn Nations Series in November and the Six Nations earlier this spring, where England won just one match, lost to Italy for the first time in their history and came fifth in the table. Despite that, after a post-tournament review, the RFU backed Borthwick, and it was announced in March that McGuigan would leave Sale at the end of the campaign. He has now officially been added to the England coaching staff on a full-time basis, with a focus on collision skills, the aerial contest and working with the back three.

“Byron is an excellent addition to our coaching group,” said Borthwick. “Since arriving with us last summer, he has made a

strong impact through his detailed understanding of the game and the energy he brings. His work in supporting the development of our back-three players has already been valuable, and he has also invested a huge amount of time into individual player development across the squad. We're excited about the contribution he will continue to make."

Raducanu edged out by Parry in first match in two months

Emma Raducanu's first match in two months ended in a narrow defeat to wily Frenchwoman Diane Parry at the WTA 500 tournament in Strasbourg. Raducanu had won their only previous meeting, a Billie Jean King Cup qualifier two years ago also on clay, in three sets, and this was another tight encounter.

The British No 1 was playing in her first tournament since a third-round defeat at Indian Wells, having struggled to recover from a viral illness over the spring, and had not made a clay-court appearance until now. However she did not appear troubled physically and went toe-to-toe with Parry, the world No 94, over the course of a topsy-turvy battle lasting two hours and 25 minutes, losing 6-4, 7-6(4).

Raducanu was also playing in her first tournament alongside new coach Andrew Richardson, who was reinstated five years after coaching her to her US Open triumph, and frequently turned to her box for support.

BACK TO TOP *^