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Thank you for your letter of 23 December to Sajid Javid, regarding Oldham Council's opposition to the Trade Union Bill. I am replying as the Minister responsible.

The Trade Union Bill introduces a number of proposals to tackle the disproportionate impact of industrial action. None of these changes are about banning strikes, but we need to get the balance right between the interests of unions and the interests of the majority of people who rely on the services provided in important public services. These modernising reforms will ensure strikes only happen as a result of a clear, positive decision by those entitled to vote.

We recognise that trade unions can play a constructive role in maintaining positive industrial relations and we support the ability of working people to strike. However, we want to reduce the impact that undemocratic industrial action has on ordinary, hardworking people and businesses, and these reforms should be seen by all as positive and necessary to modernise our industrial relations landscape.

We want to make sure that strikes are based on a clear majority of votes by a reasonable proportion of a union's members, which is why we introduced a 50 per cent threshold on ballot turnouts, which will ensure that strikes are only ever the result of a clear, positive decision of those entitled to vote. In addition, because of the adverse impact they can have on everyone, industrial action in important services including health, education, fire, transport, border security and nuclear decommissioning, will need the support of 40% of those eligible to vote. Ordinary people rely on public services, and strike action in these areas can have far-reaching consequences on many people, so it is right we make these changes to ensure strikes only occur on the basis of a strong turnout.

With regard to check off, we have announced our intention to end the practice of state-run trade union subscription payments, removing a taxpayer-funded administrative burden on employers. This will give employees greater control over their subscriptions, allowing them to set up their own direct debit with their chosen trade union, as well as consumer protection under the Direct Debit Guarantee.

In relation to picketing, we believe it is important that there are safeguards to make sure non-striking workers, employers and the public are able to go about their business during industrial action without fear of intimidation. The essence of our proposed requirements as set out in the Bill is not new. They derive from sensible guidelines in the Code of Practice on Picketing which provide certainty for unions that, where followed, picketing is lawful. The Code of Practice on Picketing is not legally enforceable as it provides guidance only which, if followed, will result in peaceful picketing. Making the Code's key aspects a legal requirement will ensure consistency across all picketing activity and therefore improve union accountability and public confidence.

We publicly consulted on a range of issues, including whether or not there is a need for an update of the Code of Practice, and whether there is a need for a new criminal offence relating to picketing. The consultation also sets out a proposal to improve transparency and consistency by requiring unions to publish their intended plans of action for each industrial dispute, including picketing, protests and social media campaigns. These proposals will not require the detail of each message or post to be controlled. It is already a criminal offence under the Communications Act 2003 for any individual to post messages of a threatening nature. The Government will publish a response in due course.

Nothing we are proposing weakens the voice of workers in the workplace, nor reduces their right to decide whether or not to participate in a trade union. What the Trade Union Bill will do is to strike a fairer balance between the rights of unions and their responsibilities towards the rest of society.

I do hope this helps to clarify the Government's position.

W. Robert White

Nick Boles

NICK BOLES MP