Dear Mary,

Thank you for your letter of 21 March, regarding the cross-Government Voluntary National Review (VNR) of the UK’s progress against the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The emerging findings document that you shared outlines the Government and Home Office activities which are contributing to progress against the SDGs.¹ The Home Office is the lead UK Government Department for SDG 16: promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, providing access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. In its single departmental plan, the Home Office has set out how its actions contribute to achieving SDG 16, including:

- Taking early action against emerging and changing crime trends.
- Protecting people from serious and organised crime.
- Securing the border against threats from people and goods.
- Disrupting terrorist threats and reducing extremism.²

Our Committee’s scrutiny of the Home Office’s performance against these actions has identified significant challenges, which I summarise briefly below.

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¹ Gov.uk, Voluntary National Review: Emerging Findings and Further Engagement, 4 March 2019
² Home Office, Home Office single departmental plan, 23 May 2018
Taking early action against emerging and changing crime trends and protecting people from serious and organised crime

- The Government often refers to crime overall as falling, but this fails to account for the huge number of victims of online fraud, and the fact that some of the most harmful and serious offences have increased. As noted in the emerging findings document, there has been an upsurge in knife crime and other forms of serious violence in recent years. The Committee’s ongoing inquiry into Serious Violence is examining how violence is changing, the likely causes of this increase, and the effectiveness of the Government’s action to tackle the problem, including its Serious Violence Strategy.3 The Committee has been told recently that changes in the UK drugs market may be having an impact – particularly the growth in the ‘county lines’ drug distribution model, and the evolution and changing methods of the street ‘gang’.4 Many witnesses have pointed to the role of public sector funding cuts, including reductions in neighbourhood policing and youth services, and others have criticised the quality of Home Office leadership in this area. We will continue to explore these and other issues as we draw our inquiry to a close.

- Our ‘Policing for the Future’ report, published in October, highlighted the major financial challenges faced by police forces, following cuts in central government funding of 30% (in real terms) since 2010-11. We concluded that policing is facing “both new challenges and rising demand from traditional crimes, yet resources in recent years have been strained, and forces are under considerable stress merely to keep up with existing pressures”. We were not convinced that enough action is being taken against emerging and changing crime trends, nor to protect people from serious and organised crime: for example, we warned that many police forces are “woefully under-resourced for the volume of online child sexual abuse investigations they now need to undertake”, that the police response to online fraud is “in desperate need of a fundamental overhaul”, and that the police service “appears increasingly ill-equipped for the challenges of the digital age”.

- We expressed grave concern about the erosion of neighbourhood policing, highlighting that, “without local engagement, policing is at risk of becoming irrelevant to most people, particularly in the context of low rates of investigation for many crimes”. We also warned that a failure to provide a funding uplift for policing would have “dire consequences”: “Efficiency savings can only go so far, in the context of the challenges that forces now face: substantial increases in serious violence and volume crime; a rise in complex cases, including child sexual offences and domestic abuse; an ever-growing workload from safeguarding vulnerable people, and an explosion of internet crime, with the evidential challenges that creates. Without extra funding, something will have to give, and the police will not be able to fulfil their duties in delivering public safety, criminal justice, community cohesion and public confidence.”5

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3 Home Affairs Committee, Serious Violence inquiry, announced June 2018
4 Home Affairs Committee, Oral evidence: Serious Violence, 26 March 2019
5 Home Affairs Committee, Policing for the Future (HC515), 25 October 2018
Securing the border against threats from people and goods.

- Evidence collected for our ongoing inquiry into modern slavery has highlighted the role that organised crime plays in this form of crime.\(^6\) Separately, the English Channel crossings inquiry has stressed the role that organised criminal gangs have played in facilitating the passage of migrants looking to come to the UK via small boats in order to claim asylum.\(^7\) The challenge of detecting and intercepting threats will be even more significant if the UK leaves the EU without a deal: we have highlighted in previous reports that the UK would lose access to European-level systems such as the Schengen Information System (SIS II), which contains information on missing and wanted persons, and Passenger Name Record (PNR) data, which provides advance notice of those travelling to the UK.\(^8\)

Disrupting terrorist threats and reducing extremism

- We are also conducting a wide-ranging inquiry into hate crime and its violent consequences,\(^9\) along with a separate piece of work specifically on anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobia.\(^10\) We have explored many aspects of this issue, including the adequacy of current legislation, the role of the far-right, and the impact of social media in facilitating the availability and spread of hateful and extremist content. Evidence collected so far suggests that there has been an increase in hate crimes and a normalisation of hateful narratives and rhetoric in society, although there is also greater awareness and condemnation of this form of crime.

- The Committee had previously concluded that the largest and most wealthy social media companies were “shamefully far from taking sufficient action to tackle illegal and dangerous content, to implement proper community standards or to keep their users safe”,\(^11\) and we will continue to monitor the actions of the major social media platforms. The Online Harms White Paper, published on 8 April, outlined that the Government intends to create a new regulatory framework to improve the safety of UK citizens online, imposing a statutory duty of care on social media companies, overseen and enforced by an independent regulator.

Home Office activity also contributes to achieving other SDGs, particularly SDG 5 (achieving gender equality), SDG 8 (promoting sustainable economic growth) and SDG 10 (reducing inequality). It does so by seeking to protect vulnerable groups, including refugees and victims of human trafficking and modern slavery, as well as affecting the goals through controlling legal migration and preventing illegal migration. We have recently made a number of relevant findings in relation to these areas of Home Office activity:

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\(^6\) Home Affairs Committee, Modern slavery inquiry, announced July 2018
\(^7\) Home Affairs Committee, Oral evidence: English Channel migrant crossings, 26 February 2019
\(^8\) Home Affairs Committee, Home Office preparations for the UK exiting the EU, Twelfth Report of Session 2017–19, HC 1674, 7 December 2018
\(^9\) Home Affairs Committee, Hate crime and its violent consequences inquiry, announced October 2017
\(^10\) Home Affairs Committee, Islamophobia inquiry, announced December 2018
\(^11\) Home Affairs Committee, Hate crime: abuse, hate and extremism online, Fourteenth Report of Session 2016–17, HC 609, 1 May 2017
• Our immigration detention report highlighted the fact that the UK is the only country in Europe without an upper limit on the length of time for which an individual can be held in immigration detention. Although Home Office guidance stipulates that detention should only be maintained when removal is imminent (within 28 days), the absence of an upper limit on the length of detention has resulted in some people being detained for long periods of time – 54 people had been detained for over a year in the last quarter of 2018.12

• Our report on asylum accommodation highlighted the poor state of facilities provided to applicants for asylum who are supported under s95 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. The Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration reported that Home Office contract compliance officers inspected properties provided by private companies to asylum seekers between March 2016 and January 2018, and found that only 24% met the required standards.13 Evidence provided to our ongoing inquiry into English Channel Crossings also suggests that there have been significant delays in transferring unaccompanied children whose applications to come to the UK have been approved, with a significant negative impact on their wellbeing.14

• Our Policing for the Future report highlighted evidence that forces face an increasing volume of work from safeguarding vulnerable people. Such work includes being first-on-scene during a mental health crisis, undertaking child protection work on a multi-agency basis, and dealing with repeat missing person incidents, including looked-after children.15 We noted that this work has been driven partly by increased awareness of the need to protect vulnerable individuals, but that police officers are also filling the gap left by the reduction of other public services: “in too many areas, the police are the only emergency service for those in crisis, and they are being used as a gateway to healthcare for those in desperate need of help”.

• We are currently examining the progress made twenty years on from the report of the Macpherson Inquiry, commissioned in the wake of the racist murder of Stephen Lawrence.16 Evidence presented so far suggests that there remain issues regarding the lack of diversity in the police workforce and continuing concerns about the disproportionate use of stop and search.17 We will continue to explore what progress has been made on issues like institutional racism or protecting people from BAME backgrounds from harm, including from racist crime.

13 Home Affairs Committee, Asylum accommodation: replacing COMPASS, Thirteenth Report of Session 2017–19, HC 1758, 17 December 2018
14 Home Affairs Committee, Oral evidence: English Channel migrant crossings, 22 January 2019
16 Home Affairs Committee, The Macpherson Report: Twenty Years On inquiry, announced December 2018
17 Home Affairs Committee, Oral evidence: The Macpherson Report: Twenty Years On, 5 February 2019
• Our report on the Windrush generation concluded in July 2018 that the Home Office’s hostile (now ‘compliant’) environment policies, aimed at deterring people from entering and staying in the UK illegally by preventing them from accessing public services, had also had a serious effect on people with a lawful right to be in the UK.\(^\text{18}\) Members of the Windrush generation were treated as illegal immigrants and detained, made destitute and, in some cases, deported. In April 2018, the Home Office established a helpline and taskforce to assist members of the Windrush generation to acquire documentation and, if sought, free British citizenship. In April 2019, following consultation with affected individuals, the Government opened a compensation scheme for those who had been wrongly classified as being in the UK illegally and who had consequently lost rights to work and to access healthcare, and the ability to rent property.\(^\text{19}\) The Committee also concluded, however, that the Home Office must get to the bottom of why internal and external warnings were ignored, so that any future crisis may be quickly identified and averted. It remains to be seen whether these lessons have been learned.

We hope this information is useful for your inquiry. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to get in contact with me, or with a member of Committee staff.

Yours sincerely

Yvette Cooper MP

\(^{18}\) Home Affairs Committee, The Windrush generation, Sixth Report of Session 2017–19, HC 990, 3 July 2018
\(^{19}\) Statement by the Home Secretary on the Windrush compensation scheme, Hansard 3 April 2019