

Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions Bill

“Legislation will prevent public bodies engaging in boycotts that undermine community cohesion.”

The purpose of the Bill is to:

- Deliver the manifesto commitment to stop public bodies from adopting their own approach to international relations.

The main benefits of the Bill would be:

- Ensuring the UK's foreign policy determines how our country interacts with other nations, which includes imposing sanctions where necessary.
- Stopping public bodies pursuing their own foreign policy agenda with public money.
- Preventing divisive behaviour that undermines community cohesion across the country by stopping public bodies from imposing their own boycott, divestment or sanctions campaigns. There are concerns that such boycotts may legitimise and drive antisemitism as these types of campaigns overwhelmingly target Israel. Such campaigns result in undue politicisation of public institutions.

The main elements of the Bill are:

- Empowering Government to ban public bodies that are already subject to public procurement rules from conducting their own boycott campaigns against foreign countries or territories. This would be applicable where these are inconsistent with official UK foreign policy as set by Her Majesty's Government.
- Stopping public bodies from taking a different approach to the UK Government on sanctions and foreign relations. This includes preventing public institutions carrying out independent boycotts, divestments and sanctions against:
 - foreign countries and/or territories, or those linked to them;
 - the sale of goods and services from foreign countries or territories; and
 - UK firms which trade with such countries or territories, where such an approach is not in line with UK Government sanctions.
- Ensuring that public bodies conduct procurement and investment activities in line with official government measures on both policy and sanctions.

Territorial extent and application

- The Bill will extend and apply across the UK.

Key facts

- It is a long-standing principle that there may be restrictions on taxpayer-funded public bodies that do not apply to private bodies; for example, public bodies cannot engage in party political campaigning.
- It is not acceptable that public bodies carry out campaigns where attempts are made to declare policies for boycotts, divestment or sanctions at variance with Government policy. We have seen motions passed by Lancaster City Council in support of such campaigns in June 2021 and Leicester City Council to boycott goods from Israeli settlements in 2014.
- The Government has zero tolerance for discrimination. Such campaigns are not in line with government policy and pit communities against each other, undermining community cohesion. Jewish groups have repeatedly challenged public bodies, including in the courts, that have called for or attempted boycotts, divestment and sanctions campaigns.
- Unofficial boycotts have gone beyond those directed at a particular state and contribute to the horrific rise in antisemitism in the UK – including Kosher food being removed from supermarket shelves, Jewish films being banned from a film festival and a student union holding a vote on blocking the formation of a Jewish student society.
- Sanctions policy should be determined by the UK Government. The UK already has a legal framework in the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 to impose, update and lift sanctions autonomously.