



MONITORING

Keir Starmer: One year on

A Dods Monitoring briefing on how
Labour policy has developed since April 2020

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Overview

[When Sir Keir Starmer was elected as Leader of the Labour Party in April 2020, he found himself in the unenviable position of having to rally a divided party that had recently suffered its worst electoral defeat since 1935 and was plagued by accusations of institutionalized antisemitism.](#) As if that was not enough to contend with, the country was also in the grip of a deadly pandemic, forcing Starmer to deliver an understated [victory speech](#) from his home via video link, with closed white window shutters as a backdrop.

Starmer told the country he would engage constructively with the Government and would not engage in “scoring party political points or making impossible demands”. One year on, and his critics have argued that this approach has proved underwhelming and Starmer has failed to chart a clear sense of direction. Len McCluskey, general secretary of the Unite union, said voters know Labour is unsure about what it is and can smell “an identity confusion, [a lack of authenticity](#)”. But Starmer has been robust on occasion, especially in relation to the Covid crisis, the single most important issue of the day which has dictated policy and tested politicians the world over. While supporting the Government’s broad efforts in the national interest, he has often beaten Prime Minister Boris Johnson to the punch with proposals for tackling the coronavirus and its devastating repercussions and has called for a public inquiry into the handling of the pandemic. He has been the first to call for national lockdowns that were later implemented, and several proposals laid out in Labour’s [five-point plan](#) to fight rising infection rates were eventually adopted by the Government in the vaccine roll out.

With the UK finally beginning to emerge from the pandemic lockdown, the local and mayoral elections

in May 2021 will provide Starmer an opportunity to showcase an alternative vision, and as one newspaper columnist put it, a second chance to make a good first impression. In a speech to launch Labour’s election campaign—this time at a lectern with the party’s traditional red logo and slogans as the backdrop—Starmer criticized [the Government’s proposed 1 percent pay rise](#) for health service workers, a view which has strong [public support](#). However, despite the UK’s high Covid death toll and a severe recession, the Conservatives have a strong lead in the polls of voting intentions, buoyed by the undeniable success of the Government’s vaccine programme. As Starmer himself has acknowledged, Labour have “a mountain to climb” to rebuild before the next general election and win back traditionally Labour-held seats – the so-called red wall constituencies – that swung behind the Conservatives in 2019 due to Brexit and other issues.

This Dods Monitoring briefing examines how Labour policy has developed under Starmer, where the party has managed to influence Government policy in the last year, and what challenges lie ahead for the leader of the opposition.





Polling

Labour were languishing on just [29 percent](#) in voting intention when Starmer took over as leader, significantly behind the Conservatives on 51 percent who were benefitting from a rally around the Government during the first lockdown. Despite these difficult circumstances, from 4 April 2020 when Starmer became leader to 4 June 2020, the Conservatives polling lead had been cut down from 21 points to six.

One of Starmer's key leadership pitches was his vast experience in public office, first as a public prosecutor and later as MP for Holborn and St Pancras. One month into his leadership Starmer had a high net [approval rating of +22](#), which was significantly higher than Jeremy Corbyn who ended his term with a [-64](#)

[net rating](#). Interestingly Starmer even had positive approval ratings amongst Conservative voters, possibly a result of the suspension of overt partisan politics from his 'constructive opposition' approach.

After a sharp increase in the first two months of Starmer's leadership, Labour would maintain a steady average over the summer at [around 37 to 38 percent](#) and roughly five points behind the Conservatives. By Autumn 2020, Labour inched even closer to the Conservatives in the polls and were neck and neck until January 2021, with both parties hovering around the 40 percent mark.

The demographics that Starmer and Labour were

appealing to also became clearer. Much of Labour's gains were amongst 2019 Liberal Democrat voters, of whom [nearly half report](#) that they will now vote Labour. The party have also made gains amongst middle-class voters, and we can see in the crosstabs of some polling a reversal of the traditional class divide. In this [YouGov poll](#) from October 2020, it is now Labour who lead amongst the middle-class, and the Conservatives who retain the lead amongst the working class.

In addition, Labour appeared to be doing well with Remain voters and people between the ages of 18-45. Yet despite Starmer's goal of winning back "red wall" Labour-Conservative switchers, only a small amount of 2019 Conservative voters report that they will be switching to vote for Labour in the next election. Crucially, Starmer's personal approval ratings begin to drop amongst Conservative voters.

Beginning from January 2021 onwards, following a second wave and another national lockdown in November and post-Christmas, Labour began to [drop in the polls](#) and the Conservatives took a steady lead once again.

Although voting intention is usually the summation of several issues, the success of the Government's vaccination rollout – a top priority issue amongst voters – is widely thought to be the reason for this spike in the polls.

At the same time, Starmer has begun to receive criticism from within the party and in the press over his leadership and strategy. His ratings drop at the same time as Labour nationally, and by the end of March [more voters now disapprove](#) of his leadership than approve. This decline can be found amongst Labour voters themselves, with many now saying they either disapprove or are unsure of his leadership. Recent polling gains for the Green Party [suggests that some](#) on the left are beginning to switch from Labour to what they may see as a more progressive party.

These fluctuations in the polls are still relatively recent, but one explanation could be the perceived lack of strong opposition and attempts to triangulate on the Government's domestic agenda. Some Labour members have also been disaffected by Starmer's position against a rise in corporation tax in the Budget, and the initial plan to abstain on the controversial Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill.

At the time of writing, Labour was [at 36 percent](#) in a stronger position than one year ago. Starmer has made progress, increasing Labour's polling numbers and initially establishing himself as the [most popular opposition leader](#) since Tony Blair. But the drop in Labour's numbers and his own approval ratings suggest that there is still a lot of work to be done. Starmer's first big test as leader will be the local elections in May, and the results will provide us with clearer answers on how Labour have progressed under his leadership.

Critics have said that Starmer has yet to offer his vision for the UK or give voters something to want to vote for. He has of course faced a first year in post unlike any other opposition leader in recent times. Starmer faces a difficult balancing act – if he sets out his vision too early, he risks losing momentum, or worse, having his ideas pinched. But if he holds off too long before offering an alternative to Johnson, he risks missing the boat.

▪ *Joshua Martin is Dods Monitoring Content Specialist*
[@Morninstar1992](#)

▪ *Tom Hunter is Dods Political Consultant for Education & Skills*

Policy Development

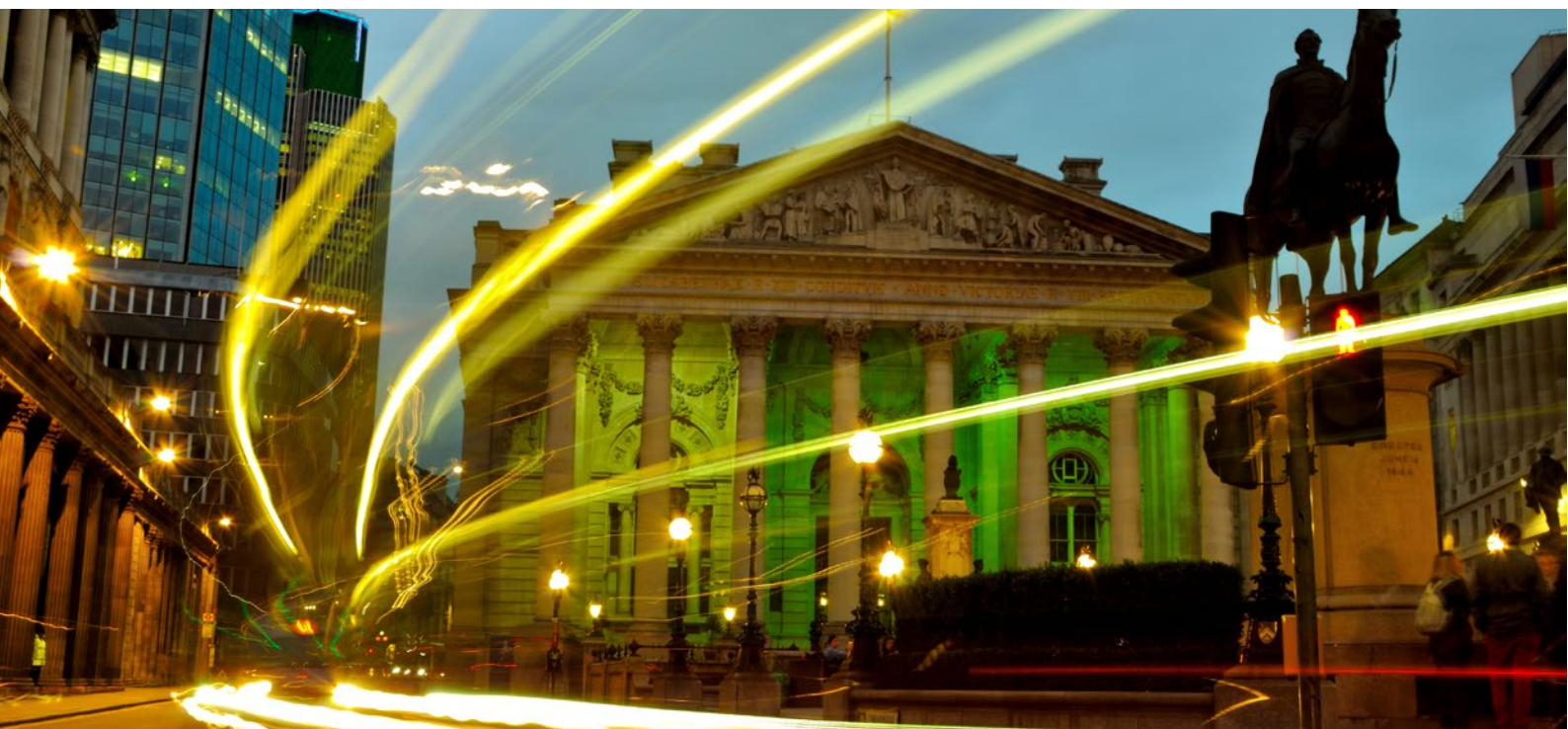
Business, Economy and Financial Services

One of Starmer's biggest challenges has been to reverse Labour's persistently poor [ratings](#) on managing the economy. [Early indications](#) show he has yet to make much headway. Public opinion has continuously sided with the Conservatives on economic policy, trusting the latter more now, even after a decade of austerity. Polls during the 2019 general election showed how Labour policies, such as increasing income tax for those earning over £80,000 or nationalising railways and utilities, were popular, but the party were unable to capitalise.

In a major [speech](#) on economic policy in February, Starmer argued that Labour must build "a strong partnership with businesses" and stressed that business was not something "just to be tolerated or taxed". Although he managed to mark a clear divid-

ing line between his approach and that of his more left-wing predecessor, the Government's unprecedented stimulus policies during the pandemic have made it difficult for Labour to stand apart. Significant increases in public spending to tackle the Covid crisis, plans to increase the tax burden to 35 percent of national income by 2025 – the highest level since the 1960s – and the introduction and extension of the job furlough scheme are policies one would expect more from a Labour Government than a Conservative one.

However, while Labour may not be able to claim responsibility for the Government's Covid era economic policies, it can certainly argue that the party, and its shadow chancellor Anneliese Dodds, has advocated for many of them before they were implemented. The party [called for a furlough scheme](#) under Corbyn, following the European model, and under Starmer, for its extension as the pandemic raged on. Labour has also repeatedly pushed for support for businesses to



deal with the Covid restrictions. All of these asks were significant for the economy and businesses, especially the furlough scheme which arguably helped [protect](#) millions of jobs. Crucially, many of them were agreed by the Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak, albeit not immediately. Starmer recently backed the shadow chancellor, amid reports that he might mark his anniversary by reshuffling some of his top team. Replacing Dodds would be a significant move, sure to trigger discussion about policy, but some reports suggest there is some concern within the party that she has not made a significant impression on the public.

Another policy win was the savings bond scheme, proposed by Labour under the name British Recovery Bond, branded by the Conservatives as the green savings bond. Starmer himself championed the proposal for a scheme in which savers could invest in Government Covid recovery projects. Although the Government promised to earmark the proceeds for green projects only, it is notable that Labour called for a much bigger and interventionist [green stimulus](#) of £30bn, with investment going into charging infrastructure for electric vehicles, renovating homes to make them low-carbon, and to help key industries reduce emissions.

Labour has also proposed several improvements to the Government's economic policies during the pandemic, including better targeting of business financial support, environmental conditionality to bailouts, and more coverage for those excluded from the furlough and self-employment income support schemes. Nevertheless, as Starmer promised at the beginning of the pandemic, these proposals aimed to be "constructive", and did not put the party at loggerheads with the Government.

However, Labour under Starmer has departed from the Government's approach in some areas, such as the treatment of business over-indebtedness. Labour has been concerned about unsustainable business debt and urged the Chancellor to convert the Bounce Back Loan Scheme (BBLs) into a student loan style arrangement under which businesses only start paying off

what they have borrowed when they return to profit. They also called for establishing a new British Business Recovery Agency to help firms struggling to pay back the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme.

Instead, the Government opted for a scheme allowing those businesses which had taken BBLs loans to extend their repayment period up to 10 years, take a repayment holiday and reduce the repayment by paying interest only for a limited period. The scheme is not linked to profit as one might assume from its name Pay As You Grow, which Labour has consistently criticised. Labour's approach has reflected concern about prematurely deciding when a business is unviable during economic stress. "Viability' is very much in the eye of the beholder. Getting this wrong has serious implications," Dodds [said in a lecture](#) earlier this year.

How to tackle the UK's huge debt load from protecting livelihoods during the Covid crisis could turn out to be a key dividing line on economic policy between Labour and the Conservatives in the medium term. Heading into the Budget, the Chancellor warned of "hard choices" and the need to get public finances on a sustainable footing. By contrast, Dodds sided with most economists and international organisations such as the IMF and OECD and called for Sunak to wait until unemployment falls and the recovery was complete before acting. In a move that revived the post-2008 financial crisis debate about the wisdom of austerity, the Chancellor cut annual departmental spending, froze the personal tax allowance threshold and high rate income tax threshold from April next year, announced plans to hike corporation tax, and doubled down on the public sector salaries cap. Despite Labour pointing to how these fiscal consolidation measures risked impeding consumption and in turn recovery, it was the corporation tax rise which dominated the media coverage. This hike turned out to be planned to take effect from 2023, a delay backed by Labour.

▪ *Maria Busca is Dods Senior Political Consultant on Financial Services [@mariabuscaMB](#)*

Climate Change and COP 26

Starmer became leader shortly after Labour had committed to radical climate action under the Green New Deal. This included a promise to decarbonise the UK economy within a decade and nationalise both public transport and the big six energy companies. One year on, and in an entirely different political context, Starmer has [continued to warn](#) that the climate emergency poses “the defining challenge of the next decade.” He has also confirmed that climate change will be “central to Labour’s agenda now and at the next election.”

Starmer’s shadow cabinet have reinforced this message, with shadow chancellor Dodds [promising](#) to test “every budget line against the goal of net zero carbon emissions.” Shadow climate change minister Matthew Pennycook has also [said](#) that a green stimulus must be the precursor to bold climate action, while the appointment of Ed Miliband, an ardent supporter of the Green New Deal, as shadow BEIS secretary was a clear statement of intent. In March 2021, Miliband [outlined](#) Labour’s vision for a green economic recovery and electric vehicle “revolution”, pledging interest-free loans for lower income households to cover the costs of an electric car.

In parliament, Labour has continued to apply pres-

sure to the Government on climate change. Labour MPs accounted for almost half of those supporting the Climate and Ecology Emergency Bill in 2020, while the reported existence of a shadow Climate Action Committee reflects Starmer’s [belief](#) that climate action should be “hardwired into every level of government.” Labour has also [launched](#) an international climate justice network, which aims to offer a voice to those experiencing the effects of the climate emergency.

Ahead of the planned UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow in November, Starmer [has said](#) the UK “can only provide credible leadership through example.” He said the transition to net zero [presents](#) “huge opportunities for our country” and has [called](#) for the internationalisation of the Green New Deal to realise climate justice both in the UK and overseas. This includes a Just Transition Plan to retrain British workers in long-term renewable projects, ending UK financing for overseas fossil fuel projects and toughening regulations on the City of London to change the global culture of finance and investment.

- *Tessa Corina is Dods Political Consultant for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs* [@TessaCorina](#)
- *Michael Thorogood is Dods Political Consultant for Energy and Utilities* [@MJThoro](#)



Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

Starmer has drawn some criticism for his efforts to define the Labour party's values, but his pick for shadow digital, culture, media, and sport secretary, Jo Stevens, has kept up the pressure on the Government to support the sectors she covers that have been hit hard by the Covid crisis.

Against the backdrop of a so-called "culture war", Starmer's efforts to win back disaffected former Labour supporters with a [new patriotic branding strategy](#) that involved use of the union jack flag, veterans, and dressing smartly have proved controversial. Critics have argued that the move risked alienating ethnic minority and younger voters, while some said it showed how worried Labour was about its electoral prospects. Clive Lewis, one of Labour's leading ethnic-minority MPs, [said](#): "The Tory party has absorbed UKIP and now Labour appears to be absorbing the language and symbols of the Tory party." Starmer has also been criticized by some for his comments regarding Black Lives Matter protests, which he referred to as a "[moment](#)". He later said he [regretted](#) these words.

In more concrete policy terms, Labour has kept up the pressure on the Government to help the cultural sector which has been decimated by the Covid lockdowns, with Stevens urging the Chancellor to provide targeted financial support. She has spoken out about job cuts at the National Trust, while her predecessor, Tracy Brabin, who is now the shadow minister for cultural industries, has [highlighted](#) redundancies at the Royal Exchange as a sign of a sector in crisis.

However, as with many policy areas, it is unclear how much influence Labour has had on the Government's approach to supporting the arts and performing sectors through the pandemic. The Government's Culture Recovery Fund, for example, has been widely welcomed by the [theatre](#) and [music industries](#), which have had their doors closed since March 2020. The fund was criticised by shadow minister for sport,



Alison McGovern, who [said](#) the Government had "fallen well short of creating an environment for growth for creative and cultural businesses". Labour has been broadly supportive of some measures in the sector, such as the Film and TV Production Restart Scheme, which Brabin said was [good news, but should not have taken so long](#). The jobs furlough scheme has been a major support for many people in the arts and performing sectors, and Dodds has [urged](#) the Chancellor to extend it.

In terms of media, Labour has urged the Government and social media companies to crack down on the spread of false information about Covid vaccines. In November, Stevens [said](#) the Government's agreement with social media companies to tackle vaccine disinformation was "woeful", and only covered a "tiny percentage of dangerous material". The following month she said Facebook's move to delete false vaccine claims was "[too little, too late](#)".

Labour have also kept up the pressure on the Government to toughen legislation to tackle dangerous and damaging online content, and criticised the

glacial progress of the Online Harms Bill which was introduced by the Conservatives in 2019 but remains in the preliminary White Paper stage. Labour has [called](#) for the Bill to be harsher, with senior company executives facing criminal penalties where persistent breaches of the law take place. Campaigner Ian Russell, whose daughter Molly took her own life aged 14 after viewing graphic self-harm images on Instagram, [has backed Labour's plan to tackle online harms. He said the](#) party's consultation, "has the scope and ambition to inform our understanding of our new digital world and guide our future decision making about how to make it a better place". The impact of Labour's pressure in relation to the Online Harms Bill remains to be seen. At the time of writing, the Government is showing no signs of speeding up

the procedure and providing a definitive timeframe for implementation.

Starmer's Labour has also called on the Government to adopt a plan to get every child online after the experience of remote schooling during the lockdowns highlighted the importance of widespread access to computing. To address the so-called digital divide, in January [Labour called for](#) mass roll-out of devices and internet access to pupils currently struggling to access online learning, alongside steps such as 'zero-rating' of educational websites to ensure data charges are not a barrier to education during lockdown.

▪ *Sheila Amedodah is Dods Political Consultant for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport*



Education and Skills

Starmer became party leader at a time when educational settings across England were closed as part of the first national lockdown. All but essential businesses were also shuttered and forced to trade online, robbing many apprentices and students on placements of the opportunity for hands-on work, and depriving some students with part-time jobs of much-needed income.

The new leader has also had to manage upheaval at the top of Labour's education team. He first appointed Rebecca Long-Bailey, a longstanding Corbyn ally and leadership contest rival, as shadow education secretary, a move that many saw as an olive branch to the left of the party. But she had barely got her feet under the desk when Starmer removed her from the role over a controversial tweet in June 2020 and replaced her with Kate Green.

Starmer's education team have effectively highlighted issues with a wide range of Government policies, including school closures, exams, youth unemployment, and the digital divide, some of which Education Secretary Gavin Williamson [has subsequently reversed](#). However, one issue where critics argue that Starmer and his team missed an open goal was on the Government's plan to not provide free school meals for children during the holidays. It was a high-profile intervention by Manchester United footballer Marcus Rashford which [pressured the Government into a U-turn](#), which led some to dub him the "unofficial leader of the opposition".

However, Labour's subsequent move to dedicate an opposition day debate to the topic proved useful when the Government whipped Tory MPs to abstain, allowing Starmer's party to take control of the campaign within the Commons and accuse the Conservatives of being happy to see children go hungry.

Nevertheless, Starmer and his team have yet to put forward a vision of what the UK education and skills system would look like under Labour. Occasionally,



members of the shadow education team have provided some suggestions, such as when shadow skills minister [Toby Perkins told Tes that it was unlikely the party would scrap T Levels](#) if it came to power. They have also put forward some alternative education proposals, for example on the [furlough scheme](#), as well as a 'Jobs Promise' for young people to access education, training or employment. Their response to the Skills for Jobs White Paper [also included a plea to widen the scope of support](#) – particularly in areas such as the Lifetime Skills Guarantee, which they argued could include a broader range of sectors and be extended above Level 3 provision for those who need to retrain.

Starmer has mostly left Green and her team to lead on the policy area. Anyone who has watched her across the despatch box from the Education Secretary knows that Green is unrelenting in her cross-examinations – and she has had plenty of opportunities to test the Government, with Williamson appearing in the Commons regularly with announcements and updates. Green has shown herself to be capable of picking holes in the Government's plans and has brought the voices of key sector stakeholders to the opposition frontbench.

Year two of Starmer's leadership might see Labour provide a blueprint for what learning would be like if it was in power, but for now we should expect a continuation of the strategy of holding the Government to account on its policy decisions – at least until the education and skills system is stable enough to be built upon again.

▪ **Tom Hunter, Political Consultant for Education and Skills**

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

When Starmer became leader, he kept Luke Pollard as his secretary of state for environment, food and rural affairs. Writing for [LabourList](#) in June 2020, Pollard said his first priority was to support and rebuild the food sector after the coronavirus crisis, and asserted “there’s a Labour case to be made for Defra: red on the outside, green on the inside.”

Under Starmer’s leadership, the Labour Party has arguably made some big strides in building bridges with farming and rural communities. Throughout the Agriculture and Trade Bills, Labour MPs and peers joined forces with campaigners across the political spectrum, calling for the UK’s high environmental protections, animal welfare and food standards to be enshrined in law, alongside expressing support for British farming. This pressure led to International Trade Secretary Liz Truss establishing the Trade and Agriculture Commission, to advise and inform the government’s trade policies.



Starmer was the first Labour leader in 13 years to speak at the National Farmers’ Union’s annual conference this year, where he discussed the challenges of winning back rural communities and vowed to move Labour closer to the countryside in the next manifesto. Specifically, Starmer tasked Pollard with leading a review into Labour’s rural policy. But Labour will have its work cut out winning over the rural electorate.

[According to a report](#) by Countryside Alliance last September, Labour only hold 8.5 percent of rural seats compared with the Conservatives holding 89 percent. To have any chance of forming a Government, Labour must broaden their appeal beyond urban areas, [political experts say](#).

Labour has traditionally been seen as having a strong track record on animal welfare. They have called for the Government to bring forward a comprehensive animal welfare bill in the upcoming Queen’s Speech, to include measures on cat microchipping, the welfare of wildlife, and tougher sentencing for filming instances of animal abuse. However, Starmer’s tenure has seen the Government show increasing concern for animal rights, with an array of related consultations and legislation.

On the environment, Labour has argued that its green recovery plans would secure jobs whilst also protecting nature, framing the pandemic as an opportunity to reconsider how we relate to the land on which we live. The plans include a proposal for a National Nature Service, and an employment programme to focus on nature conservation projects. Pollard [told the Independent](#) that he would be launching the second chapter of Labour’s “green recovery plan” early this year, focusing on the protection of biodiversity not only in the jungles and oceans of the world, but also in the fields, hedgerows and villages of the UK.

▪ *Tessa Corina is Dods Political Consultant for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs* [@TessaCorina](#)



Energy and Utilities

When Starmer took over as Labour leader, he [promised](#) to maintain his party's radical values based on the moral case for socialism. This included a pledge to nationalise energy and water utilities and devolve power to communities and local authorities. In June 2020, Starmer [offered](#) an initial glimpse into how Labour's radical vision could be realised in practice. A consultation on economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic saw Labour [vowing](#) to unlock the potential of low-cost green energy, calling on the UK Government to provide a framework for innovation so that local authorities and communities could pool resources into shared green energy schemes.

However, many supporters of the Green New Deal were [disappointed](#) when Labour published its Green Economic Recovery [Report](#) in November 2020. The report rolled back on flagship policies that had formed the basis of Labour's Green Industrial Revolution in its 2019 [manifesto](#). A pledge to achieve net zero by 2030 was gone. The [Warm Homes for All](#) scheme, which sought to retrofit 27m homes by 2030, had been replaced with a commitment to improve just 7m. Mentions of public ownership and the creation

of one million green jobs and apprenticeships were notably absent. Whereas the Green Industrial Revolution offered a radical alternative for the UK's energy and utilities landscape, Starmer's Report seemed more intent on smoothing its rough edges.

On the back of such [criticism](#), Labour quietly [reaffirmed](#) its commitment to the Green New Deal and restated its ambition to nationalise utilities and decarbonise the UK economy within a decade in December 2020. Since then, Labour have also [launched](#) an ambitious blueprint for an electric vehicle "revolution" in March and criticized the Government's lack of investment in net zero when compared to international partners. While [acknowledging](#) the ongoing role of oil and gas in the UK economy and energy system, Labour has also [called](#) for a ban on gas flaring by North Sea operators. Starmer's policies may have strayed from the radicalism of his predecessor, but Labour has shared an increasingly bold vision for a green economic recovery, especially under the stewardship of shadow business, energy, and industrial strategy secretary Ed Miliband.

▪ *Michael Thorogood is Dods Political Consultant for Energy and Utilities [@MJThoro](#)*

Equalities

“On behalf of the Labour Party, I am sorry,” Starmer said in his [first speech](#) as Labour leader in April 2020. Following an excruciating year of antisemitism allegations against the party, the former human rights lawyer set about immediately turning the page with a clear and unambiguous statement on Labour’s equalities position. And as time would tell, this foothold would come to be vital in a year much characterised by significant debates on issues relating to race, misogyny and health inequity.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) launched an investigation into the Labour Party in May 2019, following complaints that antisemitism had been allowed to proliferate in the party without disciplinary

action. The [report](#), published in October 2020, found the party had been unlawfully responsible for three breaches of the Equality Act (2010). It was a damning indictment and one which required acknowledgement from senior figures in Labour to begin the process of repair with the Jewish community.

When Corbyn, said on Facebook that he “did not accept all of [the report’s] findings”, Starmer acted quickly. In keeping with his promise of zero-tolerance on antisemitism, Starmer [suspended Corbyn](#) from the party in a matter of hours. The move was welcomed by the Board of Deputies of British Jews and the Jewish Labour Movement, who saw the action as a sign of the new Labour leadership taking responsibility for actions. While the suspension might have alienated



some Corbyn supporters in the short term, Starmer's decision could very well help Labour regain some of the Jewish electorate in years to come.

The Labour Party under Starmer has remained consistent in its approach to equalities. Throughout the pandemic, shadow secretary for women and equalities, Marsha de Cordova, has exerted pressure on the Government to improve the circumstances of minority ethnic groups who have faced higher death rates from Covid. There was, and continues to be, a palpable tension between the Government and opposition frontbenches on their approach to equalities, and the speed at which work has been done.

Starmer appointed Baroness Lawrence of Clarendon as Labour's new race relations adviser in April 2020 and asked her to carry out a review into the impact of coronavirus on Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. Research for the report, '[An Avoidable Crisis](#)', was undertaken at the same time as Government's own reviews, meaning there was likely an additional impetus for both parties to carry out work at pace.

De Cordova, Starmer, and other members of the Labour party have made clear their opinion that structural racism has contributed to higher Covid death rates amongst BAME communities. And their arguments to dismantle structural racism in the UK [intensified](#) following a series of controversial appointments to the Government's new Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, and the death of George Floyd in America. More recently, Labour was scathing of the Commission's report, calling it a divisive polemic which cherry picks statistics. Under Starmer, Labour has presented itself as a party that seeks to address racism head-on, as a means of tackling inequalities in the UK.

The Conservative Government on the other hand has taken a markedly different approach, and perhaps has even been driven by Labour's focus on racism. Equalities minister, Kemi Badenoch, has repeatedly [refuted claims](#) that 'systemic injustice' towards ethnic minority

communities has been a cause for higher death rates amongst BAME communities. Whilst the secretary of state for women and equalities, Liz Truss, has determined that the Government Equalities Office would [no longer be led](#) by a focus on protected characteristics, and instead would concentrate on individuals, separate from the circumstances of any "group" they might belong to. As the Government presses on with their new '[Fight for Fairness](#)', it will be interesting the extent to which the two parties move further apart in how they both seek to achieve the same goal of creating a more equal society.

An area where there has been increasing unanimity between the parties has been in relation to domestic abuse, or more specifically, male violence against women and girls. Although it was the Conservative Government that introduced the Domestic Abuse Bill, it would be impossible to deny the influence of the Labour party on its development. In particular [the role of Jess Phillips](#), who Starmer appointed as shadow minister for domestic violence and safeguarding soon after his victory. Phillips previously worked for the domestic abuse charity Women's Aid, meaning her impassioned and well-informed contributions in the House of Commons have regularly been listened to in earnest during debates on the Bill. Similarly, Labour MP Harriet Harman, chair of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, had been instrumental in persuading the Government to make changes to the bill, such as outlawing the courtroom murder defence of "rough sex".

Starmer and the Labour front bench have been highly critical of the Government's new Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, particularly where they say it has been a missed opportunity to adopt a firmer stance on male violence against women and girls. There is likely to be more debate on this issue as Labour continues to demand stricter measures and tougher sentencing for street harassment and rape.

▪ **Alexandra Ming is Dods Political Consultant for Health and Equalities** [@ming_alexandra](#)

Foreign Affairs, Defence and International Development

Foreign policy is one area where Starmer has taken a notably different approach to his predecessor Corbyn, a veteran peace campaigner. Starmer and his Shadow Foreign Secretary, Lisa Nandy, have sought to disavow any indication of Labour being anti-western and instead stressed Labour's internationalism and commitment to defence.

This shift was evident in Starmer's response to the Government's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy, where he criticized what he said was a £17bn "black hole" in the Government's defence equipment plan, and Johnson's decision to reduce the size of the army.

Starmer also said Labour wanted to strengthen NATO and recommit to the UK's nuclear deterrent. Although Labour has not shifted policy on either issue, his more vocal and unequivocal support is significant and more in [tune with the electorate](#).

Given his legal background, it is perhaps unsurprising that Labour under Starmer has pushed for the UK to uphold international law and become a ["moral force for good in the world once again"](#). During his tenure the party has argued that the Government's approach has

been inconsistent: giving aid to Yemen, but selling arms to Saudi Arabia; and imposing sanctions on China, but rejecting the so-called "genocide amendments" in the [Trade Bill](#). However, Starmer's moral approach could leave Labour open to accusations of economic naivety: UK weapon sales to Saudi Arabia totalled [£1.4bn](#) between July and September 2020; and the Government is not in a position to start turning down trade deals having left one of the world's largest trading blocs.

On international development, Starmer signalled Labour's commitment to the portfolio when he decided to maintain a shadow international development secretary even though Johnson had abolished the Department for International Development (DFID). The Labour Leader has also [indicated](#) he would re-establish a standalone department focussed on development if he becomes prime minister.

However, Labour has so far been unable to prevent the Government from temporarily reducing the national aid spending commitment to 0.5 percent of gross national income from 0.7 percent. Although Starmer has condemned the cut, it is Conservative MPs such as Andrew Mitchell who are threatening the Government with judicial review.

▪ *Laura Hutchinson is Dods Head of UK Political Intelligence @LauraHutch_Dods*





Health

Test and Trace and PPE Contracts

Starmer has made a point of supporting the Government's efforts to tackle the Covid crisis in the national interest, but he has also taken issue with Johnson's management and choices, in particular the approach to testing and tracing the virus and the procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE).

Labour has repeatedly criticized the Government's centralized test and trace system, with Starmer arguing that the job would be carried out much more efficiently by local public health teams. A recent report from the Public Accounts Committee which [suggested](#) there was no evidence that NHS Test & Trace had made any progress in dealing with the pandemic, seemed to support the opposition's claims.

Labour has also long argued that everybody should be compensated for self-isolating. In February Starmer called on the Government to provide £500 for every person self-isolating, not just those on low incomes and out of work as was the case at the time. On [26 March](#) the Government announced that financial support for those self-isolating would be increased via new funding to local authorities. Gradually, the Government's position has approached what Labour has been advocating, with people eligible for a £500

payment if they have to self-isolate and cannot work from home, or a parent who cannot work because their child has been told to self-isolate.

Labour has also slammed the Government's multi-billion pound procurement process for PPE, and accused it of wasting large sums of money on unsuitable face masks, test kits, and tracing systems, whilst deals were signed in haste, often with companies linked to the Conservative Party. Labour's claims were boosted by a report on Government procurement published in November 2020 by the [National Audit Office which said](#) there had been a lack of transparency and adequate documentation on various issues, including how suppliers were chosen and how it managed potential conflicts of interest. In response, the Government has said the Covid emergency required it to act at speed to save lives and it has committed to increase transparency and publish information about its contracts.

Vaccine roll-out, NHS Pay, Workforce and Immigration Surcharge

While the Government has been criticized for mis-managing some aspects of its Covid response, there is no denying the success of its Covid vaccination programme. As a result, Labour's criticism of the Government's decision to withdraw from the EU vaccine programme and Starmer's past comments in support of the European Medicines Agency have looked ill-advised in retrospect. Starmer and Labour have instead focused on praising the work that NHS staff have done in supporting the vaccine programme.

Starmer has had more political success in other health policy issues. He and the Labour party appeared to capture the national mood recently by saying the Government's plan to offer NHS staff a 1 percent pay rise was insufficient, and they should be offered 2.1 percent. Speaking to NHS workers, Starmer [said](#) that "after clapping for our carers, this is nothing short of an insult." And just a few months after becoming party leader, Starmer took issue with the Government's policy on surcharging NHS migrant workers which

meant staff often had to pay “thousands of pounds to use the NHS themselves”. The Government eventually conceded the point and said in [May 2020 that](#) it would remove the NHS surcharge.

Mental Health

Starmer and his frontbenchers have consistently pushed for greater support for the mental health of frontline workers during the Covid lockdown.

However, Labour’s impact on this policy area is debatable as the Government and NHS have also been alive to the impact of the pandemic on mental and physical wellbeing since the early stages of the crisis. There is also broad support across the House on the need for increased long-term mental health provision.

Early on in the pandemic, Rosena Allin-Khan, Labour’s shadow minister for mental health, [called](#) for mental health support for frontline staff, and Labour later [proposed](#) a “Care for Carers” package to cover NHS and social care staff in England. Although the Government declined to meet Labour representatives to discuss their proposals, NHS England subsequently [stepped up](#) mental health support for its workers.

In the face of [pressure](#) from Labour, the Government [announced](#) a £5m fund for mental health community

projects. Allin-Khan continued to [highlight](#) concerns that there was a lack of mental health support and that mental health beds were [full](#). The Government have since committed £500m to support its mental health recovery plan.

At the beginning of this year, the Government [published](#) its mental health white paper, which had been delayed by the Covid crisis. Allin-Khan welcomed the proposals to improve care but called for reassurances on community care and a commitment from the Government to address the “chasm” of health inequalities across the country. She also raised questions about when there would be a workforce settlement. Starmer’s Labour are likely to work with the Government on the white paper, as Allin-Khan noted, “we simply must get this right for everyone who depends on these services.”

- **Nabil Rastani is Dods Political Consultant focusing on Life Sciences, Public Health and International Trade** [@Nabil19963](#)
- **Alexandra Ming is Dods Political Consultant for Health and Equalities** [@ming_alexandra](#)
- **Dean Sabri is Dods Principal Political Consultant, Health, Social Care & Welfare**



Housing, Communities and Local Government

Under Starmer's leadership, Labour have helped push for protection for rough sleepers during the Covid crisis and put pressure on the Government over reforms to the building safety system and protecting leaseholders from bearing the costs of remediating unsafe cladding on buildings.

Before becoming party leader, Starmer [wrote](#) to the Labour Housing Group in January 2020 saying he was proud to stand on a manifesto in the last election "that included radical but deliverable housing policies that would have addressed the housing crisis." Some of his suggestions included a new generation of council and social homes in every community and to end rough sleeping.

Starmer's choice for shadow housing secretary, Thangam Debbonaire, has repeatedly raised the issue of support for renters and the homeless during the pandemic. Every time the Government's Covid crisis eviction ban was due to end, she led opposition [calls](#) for extensions which were subsequently granted. She has also kept up pressure on the Government to follow through on its 2019 commitment to scrap section 21 'no fault' evictions.

Starmer's Labour have been critical of the handling and pace of the Government's efforts to reform the building safety system and protect leaseholders from bearing the costs of removing unsafe cladding on buildings, the legacy of the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017 which killed 72 people. Labour ramped up pressure with an opposition day debate in February on leaseholders and cladding, calling for action on building safety and support for leaseholders.

However, the party has supported the Government's Fire Safety Bill, which began its passage through parliament in 2020, as a first step in reforming the Building Safety Regime in England.

At the time of writing, the Bill was in parliamentary ping pong with Labour Lords and MPs voting on a range of amendments that aim to protect leaseholders from cladding replacement costs. The Labour votes coupled with Conservative backbenchers have put pressure on the Government. Labour have called for the implementation of the Grenfell Tower Inquiry Phase 1 report recommendations throughout the last year. Recently, Building Safety Minister Lord Greenhalgh announced a timetable for the implementation of these recommendations. It is likely the Labour Party will continue to push the Government on these issues, particularly when the Building Safety Bill comes to Parliament later this year.

Starmer showed his commitment to local government issues by being the [first](#) Labour Leader for many years to appear at a Local Government Association Conference in July 2020. In a speech he [said](#) that under his leadership, local government had been given a bigger role in Labour politics including ensuring that every shadow cabinet member had been partnered with a local government leader. He also said a Labour administration would give local government a much bigger say over investment and services, "not through plans devised by someone in an office on Whitehall, but ones created and rooted in communities, so that they truly serve the people." In his leadership election campaign, Starmer also wrote for [LabourList](#) saying he wanted to launch a constitutional convention to propose a settlement between local and national government.

Starmer's shadow local government secretary, Steve Reed, has been critical of the Government's local government finance settlement, and its decision to allow councils to raise council tax. On Local Government, the Labour Party front bench have spent much of their parliamentary time focused on support for councils and residents during the pandemic, council funding and the Westferry Planning controversy.

▪ **Joshua Grundy is Dods Senior Political Consultant for Housing, Communities, Faith and Local Government**
[@JoshGrundy5](#)

Home Affairs and Justice

As a former Director of Public Prosecutions, Home Affairs and Justice was a portfolio many thought Starmer would command, but Labour's approach has been more reactive than proactive.

In an attempt to reclaim the narrative, the Shadow Home Secretary [recently published](#) a plan for tackling violence and supporting victims. Many of the measures, such as ensuring provision of preventative services and a new law to ensure victims are at the heart of the criminal justice system, will be welcomed and could potentially attract cross party support. However, the Conservatives will be quick to point out that the Government has already committed to deliver some of the same pledges through its police recruitment drive and pilots such as [Project Vigilant which aim to make streets safer for women and girls](#).

On key areas of legislation, such as the Domestic Abuse Bill, it has been Labour backbenchers rather than Starmer's frontbench who have successfully persuaded the Government to accept significant amendments, including the end to the so-called rough sex amendment, meaning "consent for sexual gratification" can no longer be used as a defence for causing serious harm to a person.

David Lammy, the Shadow Justice Secretary, is one of Starmer's most experienced and prominent front-benchers, and author of [the eponymous Lammy Review](#) which monitors the treatment of minority groups in the criminal justice system. However, he has spent most of his first year in the post focussing on the huge backlog of court cases that has built up during the pandemic and calling for the extension of Government projects like the Nightingale courts.

The recently introduced Police, Crime, Courts and Sentencing Bill is already proving to be divisive. Starmer has taken a hard-line position, whipping his MPs to vote against at second reading. There is an opportunity for the Labour leadership to work with others and lead on significant amendments. However, at the time of writing, the only amendment tabled by the shadow justice team concerns the cross-examination of vulnerable witnesses in court, and there is a real possibility of Starmer being overshadowed again by backbenchers like Harman, who have tabled the most notable amendments so far relating to kerb crawling and harassment in public places.

▪ *Laura Hutchinson is Dods Head of UK Political Intelligence* [@LauraHutch_Dods](#)



Social Care

Starmer has [said](#) Government failings were directly responsible for the high Covid death toll in care homes, a charge Johnson has denied, saying that guidance and procedures changed as more was learned about how infected people without symptoms could still pass on the virus.

The Government has been widely criticised for not doing enough to protect vulnerable people in care homes from Covid. Early on in the pandemic, hospital patients were discharged into care homes [without Covid tests](#), care homes had [insufficient PPE](#) and coronavirus tests, and blanket “do not attempt cardiopulmonary resuscitation” (DNACPR) orders were [applied](#) to people in the system.

Labour’s response to these issues, led by Liz Kendall, the shadow minister for social care, has had mixed results. In April 2020, the Government agreed to her call for daily reporting of care home Covid deaths after figures that showed 4,300 people had died in the system within a fortnight in England and Wales. Kendall also urged the Health Secretary Matt Hancock to deliver “whatever resources it takes” for care homes to tackle the pandemic, guaranteeing PPE for care workers and priority testing. She issued a [letter](#) setting out six areas where she believed further action was necessary. Following her calls, the Government published a care home strategy that addressed some of these issues and [updated](#) it in December. However, Labour cannot take all the credit for moving the dial. The Government also faced pressure to provide free PPE to social care workers from within the sector and from some high-profile media campaigns.

Starmer and the Labour party have been calling for the Government to make progress on long-delayed improvements to the social care system. The Government has reaffirmed its [commitment](#) to deliver reforms “later this year,” and the prime minister has suggested this could be included in the Queen’s



speech in May. In March last year the Health Secretary [reached out](#) to MPs to start cross-party talks to find a long-term funding solution for the sector, as promised in the last Conservative manifesto. However, Labour have since [dismissed](#) the move, saying there had been no cross-party discussions. It remains to be seen if the Government’s plans meet the opposition leader’s expectations, but Labour risk handing the Government significant political capital if the reforms are seen to be owned by the Conservatives.

▪ **Dean Sabri is Dods Principal Political Consultant, Health, Social Care & Welfare**



Transport and Infrastructure

The year since Starmer became opposition leader has seen transport use fall to the lowest levels for decades, but Labour has seen several of its policies implemented by the Government. Whether this is the result of a successful shadow transport team or a combination of the pandemic and a Government seeking to tackle the economy's highest-emitting sector is unclear. Under Starmer, Labour's shadow transport team has certainly been critical of the Government, but it has posed few alternative long-term solutions.

Starmer's appointment of Jim McMahon as shadow transport secretary promoted him from his previous role as shadow minister for local government devolution and finance. This appointment has seen the shadow transport team adopt a pro-devolution approach supportive of increasing powers for local and combined authorities.

The impact of lockdown on the country's rail model has been catastrophic, with the Government announcing the end of franchising last September. Labour had been calling for reform for years and published a renational-

isation plan ahead of the 2019 general election. Although Labour's transport team welcomed the Government's admission that the franchise system had failed, shadow rail minister Tan Dhesi [expressed concerns](#) that the Government was papering over the cracks and leaving taxpayers to continue to front the costs.

The Labour frontbench have also been critical of the Government's recent National Bus Strategy. Shadow bus minister Sam Tarry [said](#) deregulation had run services into the ground, and that the Government's new plan did little to address rising fares and cuts to services. However, rather than offer an alternative long-term strategy, Tarry has only called for short-term support for franchises and manufacturing companies in the sector which would see them through the pandemic.

Starmer can argue that the Conservative Government's decision to bring forward the ban on petrol and diesel cars from 2035 to 2030 was a policy borrowed straight out of the Labour Party's 2019 manifesto, but it is unclear whether the Labour transport team had any role in pushing this through. It was shadow minister for climate change Matthew Pennycook who [wrote](#) to the Transport Secretary in September calling for a plan for a rapid transition to zero-emissions vehicles, rather than a member of the transport team. Furthermore, Pennycook's letter came a month after a group of Conservative MPs called for the same policy to be implemented. However, shadow minister for green transport Kerry McCarthy has been more vocal in [recent months](#), having [criticised](#) the Government for cutting the plug-in car grant to £2,500 from £3,000 before a full strategy has been published.

A key focus for McMahon has been the lack of support for the aviation sector which has been decimated by the Covid crisis. However, his position has not always been clear. In his 12 months as shadow transport secretary there has been confusion regarding his stance on international quarantine, with the shadow secretary having both [supported](#) the policy and criticised it as a "[blunt tool](#)". McMahon has, however, been

consistent in his calls for sector-specific support for employees and businesses in the aviation industry.

Indeed, McMahon has been a champion for all workers across the transport sector throughout the pandemic, which seem to reflect what is arguably the wider issue for Labour's transport team: they know who they seek to support, but have little new to say about how to support them. In order to bring businesses, unions, and the public onside, Starmer's Labour should seek to both clarify and update its transport policy to offer a more constructive opposition.

■ ***Helen Hill is Dods Political Consultant for Transport and Infrastructure***



Trade

Under Starmer leadership, the Labour Party have yet to articulate a fully formed strategy for international trade and has instead tended to approach trade issues in terms of human rights and the rule of law. Labour under Starmer have also been critical of the Government's Global Britain agenda, highlighting its failure to secure new free trade agreements with a significant number of countries since leaving the European Union.

As shadow secretary for exiting the European Union before becoming party leader, Starmer had a front row seat to the most significant shift in the UK's international trading arrangements in decades.

Initially a strong supporter of the UK's membership of the bloc, Starmer signaled that Labour would not be re-running old arguments by backing the Government's 11th-hour trade deal with the EU in December 2020. However, Starmer was keen to stress that Labour were only supporting it to avoid a no deal exit. The deal was "thin", and did not provide adequate pro-

tections for British manufacturing, financial services, or workplace rights, he said.

Under Starmer, the Labour Party have also been vocal about the post-Brexit trade disputes with the EU. For example, the Party criticised the Prime Minister over failures to provide a long-term solution to the instability caused by the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol. Calling for "[lasting solutions that will lower tension](#)", Louise Haigh, shadow secretary of state for Northern Ireland, highlighted the need to maintain frictionless trade both within the UK and with the EU. Labour has also criticised the Government's handling of the EU's post-Brexit shellfish trade restrictions, which have hit UK producers.

Outside of the EU, Emily Thornberry, shadow international trade secretary, has framed UK trade issues in terms of human rights. In February, she urged the Government to follow President Joe Biden's lead and suspend arms exports to Saudi Arabia for use in the war in Yemen. Labour also supported the so-called 'genocide amendment' to the Trade Bill, which aimed to prevent the Government from striking trade deals with countries that have committed genocide. Although the amendment was not specifically aimed at China, MPs and peers framed it the context of Beijing's crackdown on the Uighur population. Thornberry urged MPs to support the amendment, telling them to "[vote with their conscience](#)." Although the amendment, which was also backed by some high-profile Conservative MPs, was eventually struck down, Labour's support for it was a strong indication of the importance the party places on human rights in international trade. Such a stance might open Labour up to accusations of economic naivety, given the UK already trades with several countries with poor records on human rights. However, this approach could appeal to liberal, cosmopolitan, and younger voters who have strong views on the importance of human rights and climate change issues.

▪ *Nabil Rastani is Dods Political Consultant focusing on Life Sciences, Public Health and International Trade*





Welfare

Starmer can claim some notable success in pushing the Government to change its welfare provisions. One of the Government's headline measures to support people during the Covid crisis has been a temporary £20 per week increase in universal credit, which was due to expire in April. In advance of the Budget Starmer pushed for the Government to extend the measure and used an opposition day debate in January to call on the Treasury to stop what he called the "planned cut" in Universal Credit. Most Conservatives abstained in the non-binding vote, ensuring the Labour motion was passed by the Commons, but six Conservative [rebels](#) also voted in favour of an extension. In his Budget speech in March,

the Chancellor [announced](#) that the uplift would indeed be extended for a further six months.

However, after pushing for the extension, Labour now faces a tricky decision on whether to call for the £20 a week uplift to be made permanent. At the time of writing, Starmer and his shadow chancellor have not confirmed where they stand. The decision is likely to be seen as a key indicator of the party's stance on fiscal sustainability and management of the public finances. Starmer has also previously pledged to scrap universal credit, something the prime minister has pointed out

▪ *Dean Sabri is Dods Principal Political Consultant, Health, Social Care & Welfare*

Lookahead

Key 2021 dates

4th April

One-year anniversary of Keir Starmer's election as Labour Leader.

14th April

Labour Opposition Day, House of Commons

6th May

Scottish and Welsh Parliamentary elections, Local and Mayoral elections & Hartlepool by-election.

11th May

Queen's Speech.

13th May

Airdrie and Shots by-election.

21st June

Government roadmap proposed earliest possible date for removal of all Covid restrictions.

21st July

Labour MP, Apsana Begum appears on trial for three fraud offences in relation to the award of a social housing property in Tower Hamlets.

TBC July

NHS Pay Review Body Report.

25th – 29th September

Labour Annual Conference, Brighton.

October

Coronavirus Act emergency measures set to expire.

1st November

COP26, Glasgow.



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customer.service@dodsgroup.com

+44 (0)207 593 5500