



POLITICAL  
INTELLIGENCE

# Making the manifestos

The people and  
processes in England's  
three largest parties

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## Introduction

The next UK general election must be held by January 2025, but may well happen sooner. Once the date is confirmed and the campaign is officially underway England's three main political parties – the Conservatives, Labour, and Liberal Democrats – will each set out their policy plans in a manifesto, usually launched with as much fanfare as possible. While the Covid crisis and Ukraine war have shown how these glossy documents can be rapidly overtaken by events, they nevertheless remain an important statement of the parties' ambitions and a yard stick for performance in office. However, while all the parties produce a manifesto, their approach varies widely, with the Conservatives' opaque centralised approach contrasting with Labour's and the Lib Dems' more transparent step-by-step process of consultation with party members.

This Dods Political Intelligence report provides a guide to the manifesto process of England's three main political parties, including how policy is developed and finalised, and some of the influential internal and external figures involved.



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## Conservatives

### Policy and manifesto development

The Conservative Party operates a **centralised top-down process for developing policy**, led by senior party figures and an evolving group of internal and external influencers, usually with less input from party rank and file than other UK parties. The Conservative manifesto process usually happens behind closed doors and is closely guarded.

**Conservative Campaign Headquarters** (CCHQ) is responsible for the drafting of policy in addition to election campaigns and financing. As the governing party since 2010, the Conservatives have the benefit of a steady stream of government consultations, research, lobbying and other streams of policy ideas and recommendations to help them formulate policy. Like most major political parties, CCHQ also has a history of using opinion polling and focus groups to help inform its manifesto. Discussions also take place in the **Party Policy Board**, the party's governing body which is responsible for choosing candidates, fundraising, and membership, and presided over by party chairman, currently Greg Hands.

Although party members have little formal sway over the policymaking process, there is an established route of input for the grassroots. The **Conservative Policy Forum** (CPF) was relaunched in 2015 with the mission to ensure party members are both heard and seen to be heard, as well as to help the party identify potential future problems and put forward ideas for



improving the country. It gathers policy ideas through member events and consultations and then feeds them into CCHQ and the **Prime Minister's Policy Unit** based in Number 10. The forum says that at the 2019 general election, several commitments in the published manifesto could be traced back to ideas proposed by CPF groups, and almost half of the proposals in the CPF Members' Manifesto were reflected in the published manifesto. To produce the next CPF Members' Manifesto, it held a consultation on 'Ideas for the Next Manifesto', which closed in late November 2022. It said **the most frequently mentioned areas** of policy were human rights and freedom of speech, energy and food security, migration, planning and housing, deregulation and pensions.

**“Stakeholders should get their ideas in early, and demonstrate how they align with the government’s current priorities.”**

The Conservative party's secretive so-called **Advisory Board**, made up of individuals who have made large financial donations to the party, also has an opportunity to feed into the policymaking process, though how much sway it has is hard to gauge. The party does not disclose specific information on the group. Media reports have indicated

that individuals need to donate more than £250,000 to become a member and enjoy private meetings and policy updates from the prime minister and other senior government and party figures. The Conservatives have said the group is part of its legitimate fundraising operations and the party declares its donations as required on a quarterly basis to the Electoral Commission. Nevertheless, the group has raised questions about a lack of transparency and paid-for influence by high net-worth individuals.

The Conservative party did not respond to requests from Dods for information on their manifesto development process.

**Rachel Wolf**, co-author of the 2019 Conservative manifesto and founding partner of Westminster agency Public First, said her entire snap election period was spent pulling ideas together into one coherent document. Speaking at an event in July 2022, Wolf said she had people coming to her with policy suggestions right up to the day the manifesto went to print. Her message to stakeholders was to get their ideas in early, and show how they align with the party's current priorities.

Party HQ insiders have also suggested that it's not uncommon for some more deferrable policies to be held back from being announced while in office so they are fresh in the manifesto.

### Key internal figures

The Conservatives' 59-page [2019 manifesto](#), launched by Boris Johnson in Shropshire, was a team effort with several authors, including **Robert Colville**, a journalist and director of the Centre for Policy Studies

(CPS) think tank, and Wolf. While it remains unclear who will be responsible for writing the next manifesto, a range of internal figures working on policy for Sunak are expected to feed into the process.

Within Number 10, **Eleanor Shawcross** was appointed Sunak's Head of Policy in November 2022, according to reports. The former chief of staff to George Osbourne and chief of staff at the Department for Work and Pensions, advised Sunak when he was Chancellor and is credited with being the driving force behind many of the PM's policy ideas during his leadership campaigns. **James Nation**, who also advised Sunak during his time at the Treasury and was a policy advisor at the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), is her deputy. **Douglas McNeill**, a former stock market analyst and Treasury adviser, is the PM's economics adviser.

Other Sunak advisers may also help feed into the policymaking process. These include chief of staff **Liam Booth-Smith**, a housing policy expert and former Sunak Treasury adviser and head of the Joint Economic Unit; **Will Tanner**, former founder/director of the centre-right Onward think tank, is the deputy chief of staff – he was previously an adviser to Prime Minister Theresa May and deputy head of policy at Number 10; **James Forsyth**, a close personal friend of prime minister and former political editor of *The Spectator*, was appointed his political secretary in December 2022 with a mission to ensure coordination between Downing Street, policy teams, and MPs ahead of the election, according to reports.

## “It’s not uncommon for some more deferrable policies to be held back from being announced while in office so they are fresh in the manifesto.”

Among MPs, **Greg Hands**, who was appointed to party chair in February 2022, has already proven to be a key Conservative campaign figure during the 2023 local elections. Joining him in CCHQ is **Paul Holmes**, a former special adviser to several cabinet ministers, who was made party vice-chair with [responsibility for policy](#) in November 2022. Deputy Prime Minister **Oliver Dowden**, who chaired both of Sunak’s leadership campaigns, remains an influential figure, with the FT reporting him described as “Rishi’s right-hand man”.

### Influencers

As well as the key internal Conservative figures, the party is expected to draw ideas from a wider circle of external influencers. Onward – founded in 2018 by Tanner, businessman **Martyn Rose**, and former MP **Neil O’Brien** – has emerged as one of the more influential think tanks, with Sunak himself commending its work. During the leadership race of summer 2022, many of Sunak’s ideas chimed with suggestions in Onward reports. **Sebastian Payne**, a former FT Whitehall Editor whose book “Broken Heartlands” catalogues the raft of 2019 Labour losses in the so-called ‘Red Wall’, has been director of Onward since Tanner moved to Number 10. The think

tank has attracted a line-up of prominent thinkers and commentators, with its recommendations sharing similarities with recent government announcements, particularly around housing, planning, levelling up and net zero.

Other prominent influencers in the think tank include **Adam Hawksbee**, deputy director; **Lord Daniel Finkelstein**, board chair; **Lord James O’Shaghnessy**, board member and former No 10 policy director; **Ellie Varley**, former parliamentary chief of staff; and **Craig Elder**, board member and architect of Tory 2015 campaign.

The **Centre for Policy Studies** (CPS), led by Colville, who is also editor-in-chief of the think tank’s online site CapX, remains an important font of Conservative policymaking ideas. The think tank, which was founded by Sir Keith Joseph and Margaret Thatcher and helped develop much of what can be termed Thatcherism, focuses on taxation, economic growth, business, welfare, housing and environment policy. The group, which has championed the levelling up agenda as well as reform of stamp duty and free ports, often attracts the involvement of senior government figures at its events.

**Policy Exchange**, a large think tank where Sunak himself once worked and co-authored a report “[A portrait of modern Britain](#)”, also continues to provide policy ideas and retain links with the highest levels of government. Set up by a group including Levelling Up Secretary Michael Gove and former minister Francis Maude, it has provided policy inspiration and analysis, including on the government’s controversial efforts to [deport asylum seekers to Rwanda](#).

Sunak and Chancellor Jeremy Hunt have also sought council from a wider group of former officials and experts, including former Chancellor George Osborne, and his one-time Treasury adviser, Blackrock economist **Rupert Harrison**, who is a member of the Chancellor's [Economic Advisory Council](#) and a Conservative parliamentary candidate. Other members of the council include former Bank of England policymaker **Andy Haldane**, who also chairs the government's Levelling Up Advisory Council.

The people drafted to Sunak's Number 10 operation suggest the libertarian and free market think tanks that Liz Truss drew inspiration and personnel from during her premiership, including the TaxPayers' Alliance and Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA), may not have the same top-line influence on the next Conservative manifesto, despite appealing to some Tory voters.

The Conservative party has always been a broad church with various factions of

varying degrees of cohesion pushing different, economic, and geographical agendas, though their influence on the manifesto remains to be seen. These include the **New Conservatives**, a group of MPs representing so-called Red Wall constituencies in the north of England including **Miriam Cates** and **Danny Kruger** that has presented proposals to limit immigration. The **Democratic Conservative Organisation**, led by prominent Johnson supporter and Brexiter Lord Peter Cruddas and supported by former home secretary Priti Patel, has proposed changes to the party's governance.

Other groups of MPs include the **China Research Group**, chaired by Alicia Kearns, which aims to fuel debate about the rise of China; the **Northern Research Group**, which pushes for policies for constituents in northern England; and the **Net Zero Scrutiny Group** of more climate-sceptic backbenchers.

## Labour

### Policy and manifesto development

The **National Executive Committee** (NEC) is Labour's governing body, responsible for setting strategic objectives on an annual basis, with its members having final signoff on the manifesto. Policy is developed through the **National Policy Forum** (NPF), a body of some 200 representatives from across the major groups of the party including constituency parties, trade unions, and MPs. Policymaking runs continually, with updated documents produced for every annual autumn party conference, where members, supporters and affiliate groups can make submissions to the process and vote on them.

The NPF entered its most recent development cycle in 2020, and the consultation period closed in July 2022. The [final report](#) was presented to members for the 2022 annual conference. It has also closed its [2023 consultation](#), which sought views from members on policy including delivering growth, trade, and empowering communities. For the latest cycle, NPF representatives have been [grouped into six commissions](#) to examine broad policy areas, each co-convened by a Shadow Secretary of State and an NEC member.

A party spokeswoman told Dods in July that **Labour is into the final year of the NPF cycle** to produce of a set of documents covering the full range of policy. These internal, draft documents were circulated to all NPF representatives in May and will be subject to debate, amendment, and agreement over the summer before



being put to a vote at annual Conference in October 2023. At that point the NPF's final report becomes the 'party programme' from which items can be drawn for the manifesto, she said. As part of the process for drawing up the manifesto, [a BBC report in July](#) said the party's latest NPF meeting in Nottingham had agreed a programme for government without a need for new spending commitments.

**“Labour is into the final year of the NPF cycle to produce a set of documents covering the full range of policy.”**

In the run-up to a general election, senior party figures hold a 'Clause V' meeting, taking its name from Clause V of the party rulebook, to formally agree the policies that will go into the manifesto. This is chaired by Starmer, and includes NEC members, the shadow cabinet, and senior trade union officials. Past officials have said policies can be largely set before the high-level meeting in the interests of maintaining party unity heading into the elections. However, In the case of a snap election, like in 2017 and 2019, the final document can be subject to debate and last-minute changes, even during the session.



Dods subscribers can check out our compilation of Labour's [most recent policy pledges here](#).

## Key internal figures

**Ravinder Athwal**, a former head of growth strategy at the Treasury, was appointed Labour's director of policy in November 2022, tasked with putting together the manifesto, according to reports. The party's former head of economic policy took over the role from Claire Ainsley who was director from 2020-22 and reportedly responsible for readying a manifesto in case there was a snap election. **Peter Hyman**, an education policy expert who was Tony Blair's speechwriter and head of communications at Number 10, was drafted in late 2022 as a senior adviser to Starmer to help hone the manifesto and write speeches, according to reports. Labour's 2017 and the 2019 manifesto, "[It's time for real change – for the many not the few](#)", were lead-written by Andrew Fisher, then director of policy for Jeremy Corbyn.

**Deborah Mattinson** is Labour's Director of Strategy, dubbed "Starmer's strategic brain" by the New Statesman, tasked since mid-2021 with helping Labour "[reconnect with voters it has lost](#)". Mattinson, who founded the Britain Thinks consultancy and wrote "Beyond the Red Wall" about voters the party lost to the Tories in 2019, advised Labour in the 1980s through the emergence of New Labour, including being pollster for Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

Starmer may not be directly involved in the manifesto writing process, but he is known for his legalistic grasp of policy detail. Rachel Reeves, the shadow Chancellor since 2021,

is similarly influential alongside her economic adviser **Spencer Thomson**, who was reportedly responsible for the party's energy price freeze and windfall tax policies. Reeves replaced Anneliese Dodds in the role, who has since been Labour Party Chair, in charge of [the party's 2022 policy review](#).

Other key figures include **Stuart Ingham**, the Deputy Director of Policy since 2020, who [has worked for Starmer](#) since his leadership bid, and **Tom Webb**, the Director of Policy and Research. Other recent policy-focused appointments in Starmer's team include **Adam Terry** as Head of Policy Development, following his work with Dodds on the policy review, and **Muneera Lula** as the Head of Domestic Policy, who was previously a political adviser to the deputy leader. The two are part of a team responsible for whittling down NPF policy ideas to what will eventually form the foundation of the manifesto.

**Vidhya Alakeson**, a former head of the Power to Change trust and deputy chief executive at the Resolution Foundation think tank, was appointed as Starmer's Director of External Relations in 2022, with part of her role to improve Labour's relationship with the business community, according to reports. **David Wood**, is the opposition leader's Trade Union Liaison Manager, using his experience as a stakeholder engagement adviser to the Mayor of London to manage the important but sometimes tricky links with Labour's affiliated unions. Starmer has also picked **Sue Gray**, a senior civil servant who led the investigation into reports of lockdown rule-breaking in Johnson's Number 10, as Labour's chief of staff, although she faces a



period of gardening leave before starting the role. Former chief of staff **Morgan McSweeney** has been the party's campaign director since 2021, working reportedly with **Matthew Pound**, who advises the general secretary, and Matthew Faulding, who oversees candidate selections. **Shabana Mahmood**, the MP for Birmingham Ladywood, is Labour's National Campaign Coordinator, recently presiding over the party's improved 2023 local election results.

## Influencers

Starmer and his shadow cabinet have looked to harvest policy ideas from a range of domestic and foreign sources, [including like-minded parties overseas](#), with the leader saying he favours practical solutions over ideology.

## “Under Starmer, Labour has made a concerted effort to woo the business community.”

Reports suggest he and his team have talked to or mined information from think tanks including the **Institute for Public Policy Research** (IPPR), the **Centre for Social Justice**, the **Fabian Society**, the **Tony Blair Institute**, the **Social Market Foundation**, **Centre for Cities**, and the **Resolution Foundation**, whose chief executive **Torsten Bell** [has been retweeted by Dodds and Levelling Up](#) spokeswoman Lisa Nandy who has also shared the think tank's work with praise. Some recent policy announcements from the party shared similarities with reports by the Fabian Society, which is led by general-secretary

**Andrew Harrop** and research director **Luke Raikes**.

Starmer has also sought the counsel of party grandees. In an interview with Channel 4 News in July 2022 he [acknowledged he was talking to Blair and Gordon Brown](#), saying he was “particularly keen to talk to people who have won elections.” Starmer was the headline speaker at the Tony Blair Institute's Future of Britain conference in July, sharing the stage with Blair.

Former prime minister **Gordon Brown** chaired the party's 'Commission on the UK's Future' which published a report featuring [proposals to decentralise power](#), including by replacing the House of Lords with a democratically-elected second chamber. Former home secretary and education secretary, **Lord David Blunkett** has also conducted a similar review to produce a report with recommendations for the UK's education and skills system – many of which [featured in the party's recent 'Opportunities' mission announcement](#).

Under Starmer, Labour have also made a concerted effort to woo the business community, including [through summits](#), speeches at groups like the British Chambers of Commerce, and arranging private meetings with senior party members like Reeves, according to reports. The party also commissioned **Lord Jim O'Neill**, a Crossbench peer who served as a Treasury minister under both May and David Cameron, and who chairs the Northern Powerhouse Partnership – to [lead its 'Start-up, Scale-up' review](#), which returned its findings in December 2022.

Some grassroots groups continue to hold strong relationships with party leadership – for example, Reeves recently chose a **Labour Together** event to [set out her economic vision](#) for a future Labour government.

Left-wing pressure groups who were more prominent during the Corbyn leadership, such as Momentum, continue to look to exert influence, though it remains to be seen whether their ideas will be considered for the manifesto.

## Liberal Democrats

### Policy and manifesto development

The Lib Dems are arguably the most democratic and transparent of the three main English parties when it comes to policymaking. In principle, a proposal cannot become policy until the members have approved it at the party's spring or autumn conference. The party's **Federal Policy Committee** (FPC), chaired by the party leader, Sir Ed Davey, is responsible for researching and developing policy, including [producing policy papers](#) for debate at conference, and drawing up the election manifesto. The FPC maintains a dialogue with party spokespeople so that their statements and party policy remain in line.

To allow party members to vote on policy ideas, the **Federal Conference Committee** (FCC), which runs the spring and autumn conferences, selects motions and amendments for debate. Motions can also be put to the FCC by at least 10 party members, or local parties, or party interest groups known as Specified Associated Organisations (SAOs). The FPC can also put forward a motion for debate. There is no fixed format for a policy motion, though it normally includes criticism of an existing policy position, some general principles on the Lib Dem approach to the policy area in question, and proposals for how to do something differently. Motions are debated at conference, led by the chair. The Liberal Democrats are holding public webinars to attract input on policy.



The FPC, which has three vice chairs, including one parliamentarian, reports on its policy work on a regular basis. In its June post, **Jeremy Hargreaves**, FPC vice-chair, told members [the party now had a website](#) to show how policy is made and list its policy papers. He also said more work had been done on the party's draft manifesto, or "pre-manifesto", especially on its narrative and specific policies, ahead of its autumn conference in Bournemouth. The FPC can also create "interim policy" in exceptional circumstances to enable the party to have a position on important issues that arise before members have had a chance to take a view at a conference.

**“The party aims to have  
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The FPC will usually start preparing the manifesto about two years before the election, by appointing a **Manifesto Working Group** to do the detailed preparatory work, using draft policy from the FPC. The [Group for the next election](#) is chaired by **Lord Richard Newby**, leader of the Liberal Democrats in the Lords since 2016, and includes Davey, other serving Liberal Democrat MPs, party officials, and advisors. The Group usually publishes the pre-manifesto document about a year

before the expected election which is then put to the party conference for approval. Some reports suggest the core manifesto could be much shorter than in 2019, with a supplementary document finalising details. The pre-manifesto will normally form the basis of campaigning in the months leading up to the election. Following approval of the pre-manifesto the FPC then develops the pitch further, with the Treasury team also assessing any spending commitments, before agreeing and publishing the final manifesto at the start of the election campaign. The party's 2019 manifesto was entitled "[Stop Brexit – build a brighter future](#)".

A Lib Dem spokesman told Dods in July that the party planned to consult with a range of external stakeholders with a view to gathering their ideas for the manifesto by Christmas. With an election looming, it aimed to have a first draft of the manifesto ready for the FPC to discuss in February, the spokesman said.

## Key figures and influences

Alongside chair Richard Newby, and party leader Ed Davey, the 10-person Manifesto Working Group also includes: Hargreaves, a health service professional who is also vice-chair of the policy committee; MPs [Wendy Chamberlain](#) and [Munira Wilson](#); peer [Baroness Jenny Randerson](#); local councillors, [Lucy Nethsingha](#), who is also vice chair of the FPC, [Lisa Smart](#) and [Josh](#)

[Babarinde](#); and Kings College London senior lecturer, [Christine Cheng](#).

[Joseph Wright](#) and [Christian Moon](#), who work in the Lib Dem HQ policy unit, are responsible for compiling proposals to be discussed by the FPC and party members.

[Mark Pack](#) has been president of the Lib Dems, since January 2020, being re-elected to the role in November 2022, and sits on the FPC and elections committee. The author, who has also worked in IT and communications roles, worked for the party between 2000-09, including a period as Head of Innovations and running the party's digital and data operation for the 2001 and 2005 general elections.

As well as Davey and others mentioned above, the FPC includes six parliamentarians, including [Layla Moran](#) and [Helen Morgan](#); a Federal Communications and Elections Committee representative, two Councillors, [Susan Juned](#) and [Peter Thornton](#); three state party representatives, including [Sally Burnell](#), director of policy, media and strategy for the British Veterinary Association, and some directly elected members including [Duncan Brack](#), policy analyst and former special adviser; [Belinda Brooks-Gordon](#), Birkbeck University lecturer; and former Lib Dem MP and MEP [Martin Horwood](#). The [Federal Conference Committee](#) is chaired by [Nicholas da Costa](#), a healthcare professional and councillor for Highgate Ward in Haringey.