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## **Not for patching?**

Public opinion and  
the commitment to  
‘build back better’

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‘A revolutionary moment  
in the world’s history is a  
time for revolutions, not  
for patching’.

Beveridge Report, 1942.

The Mile End Institute brings together academics, politicians, policymakers, and the public to discuss and debate the major challenges facing the country in a fast-moving and ever-changing world.

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# Introduction: What should ‘build back better’ mean?

Announcing the launch of a ‘Build Back Better Council’ in January 2021, bringing together various business leaders, the Prime Minister Boris Johnson said that ‘as we recover from this crisis it won’t be enough to just go back to normal – our promise will be to build back better and level up opportunity for people and businesses across the UK’.<sup>1</sup> The following month, the Leader of the Opposition, Keir Starmer, said he believed ‘there’s a mood in the air which we don’t detect often in Britain. It was there in 1945, after the sacrifice of war, and it’s there again now. It’s the determination that our collective sacrifice must lead to a better future’.<sup>2</sup>

The historian and peer – and the Mile End Institute’s patron – Lord Hennessy similarly argued recently that the Covid-19 experience ‘has sharpened our sense of the duty of care we have one for another, that a state has for all of its people, to a degree we have not felt collectively since World War Two and its aftermath’.<sup>3</sup>

These appraisals of the impact of the crisis, and political commitments to change, are giving rise to debate. Are we to experience a moment similar to that of postwar transformation? If so, what is the prospect for the Britain that emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic to be significantly different, in policy terms, from what preceded it? The latter question in particular animates this project – *Not for Patching?*, of which this report marks our earliest findings, based on an opinion survey.

Ipsos MORI surveyed 1,120 adults across Great Britain, posing questions across a range of policy areas. Fieldwork was carried out online from 19 March 2021 to 22 March 2021, and data weighted to match the profile of the population. All polls are subject to a wide range of potential sources of error, but they still give us an insight into the public’s priorities. Further analysis of this data, and further surveys, will continue to add to this project.

The purpose of this report is to examine the views of the British public on what rebuilding after the pandemic might mean. What we offer here are some preliminary indications of what policy areas the public want to prioritise, and how the machinery of government has managed and performed during this crisis. We are interested in both priorities and performance here, not least because we consider them linked.

How the UK state has fared during this crisis may well affect what we, as a society, believe needs to be prioritised next. The crisis has had many effects, from the tragic loss of so many lives, to the unequal impact in terms of jobs and education. To ‘build back better’ may mean addressing the harmful impacts of the crisis first.

We asked questions covering a range of areas related to priorities and performance, including:

- How do people think the pandemic has changed society?
- Which policy priorities should inform the Prime Minister’s commitment to ‘build back better’?
- Which areas of government spending would the public like to see receive more funding – or less funding – after the pandemic than before?
- Are the public prepared to see taxes go up to pay for any increased spending?
- What areas of government delivery during the pandemic are perceived as successes or failures?
- Has the government taken the right approach to scientific advice during the Covid crisis?
- What do voters think of the approach of the opposition and how party politics at Westminster has functioned in the crisis?

Although the pandemic has raised a host of important questions about how the four nations of the UK relate to one another in the light of growing fragmentation and the strains imposed by the pandemic, this survey is explicitly concerned with the views of the public across Britain.

We find:

- A majority (52%) said that they believed economic inequality had worsened during the pandemic
- The NHS was the most popular policy priority for rebuilding after the crisis (selected by 51%), followed by jobs and unemployment (35%), and mental health (28%).
- In relation to schools, support for pupils’ mental health and wellbeing was the most popular policy priority (38%).
- David Cameron and George Osborne’s economic strategy of public spending reductions after 2010 to reduce the deficit was judged to be the wrong decision by 47% of people.
- 76% of people supported more spending on health and social care compared with before the pandemic, followed by protecting the environment (56%), policing and criminal justice (54%), housing (52%), and welfare, benefits and pensions (51%).
- Four-in-ten people said they were prepared to pay more in taxes to fund public services.

- The vaccination programme leads the way in terms of public satisfaction with government delivery of major programmes during the pandemic (71% satisfied). The furlough scheme also has a positive result (60%), while in other areas there was much greater dissatisfaction – for example, with the ‘Test and Trace’ programme (55% dissatisfied).
- People appear to take a pragmatic view of the boundary between the public and the private sector in the provision of public services responding to the pandemic – with support for private sector involvement if it can boost the effectiveness of the state’s response.
- On whether the government has ‘followed the science’ during the crisis, the public are divided – 38% think the government have followed the science about the right amount compared with other factors, followed by 33% not enough and 20% too much.
- Keir Starmer’s approach of ‘constructive opposition’ has divided voters – the largest group (35%) think the leader of the opposition has done either a fairly or very bad job at this, followed by 29% saying neither good nor bad and 27% fairly or very good (27%).

Our report shows that the public are thinking seriously about the effects of the pandemic. We get a sense of their priorities – with health and wellbeing, from boosting NHS funding to supporting young people’s mental health in schools, topping priority lists. We see that their judgement on post-2010 ‘austerity’ is largely negative, raising big questions for the government as to whether they go ahead with cuts to unprotected areas of public spending. And we can see clear views on what is perceived as successful and unsuccessful areas of government delivery.

Whether the political legacy of this ongoing crisis will be a ‘1945 moment’ is, of course, a matter for all of us. Moments of transformation don’t simply occur. Neither polling trends nor political ideas alone can lead to a transformation in society and its institutions. Instead, as with the 1942 Beveridge Report, and the subsequent creation of longstanding institutions of the British state, these moments are constructed – by beliefs and ideas, by debate and organisation, and by persuasion and commitment.

This report is the first in a series for the Mile End Institute at Queen Mary University of London, examining the gap between public views and perceptions, and the policy agenda of governments. It adds a policy-relevant angle to the excellent work being carried out by colleagues in other institutions.<sup>4</sup> We will produce more research in the coming months that seeks to understand the shape of the changes that the public would like to see in Britain in the aftermath of the pandemic, the potential choices and trade-offs, and how the country can – together – recover as the crisis abates.



# Results and Analysis

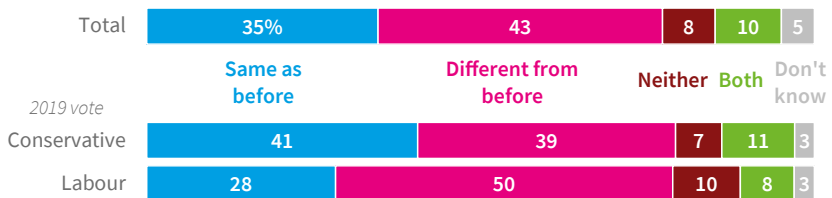
## 1. People's policy priorities and choices

### A desire for change?

We begin with a very general question: whether, when the pandemic is over, people will want life to go back to how it was before, or whether they want things to be different. Overall, attitudes to this question were mixed, as shown in Figure 1. Some 35% of people said they'd prefer life to return to being the same as before, while 43% wanted things to be different, with 8% choosing 'neither' and 10% opting for 'both'. Labour 2019 voters were more in favour of change (50%), but even with this group there were a quarter (28%) who wanted things to be the same as before.

**Figure 1: Totals for 'same as before' vs. 'different from before'**

On balance, **would you prefer it if life goes back to how it was before the crisis once the pandemic is over, or do you want things to be different?**



Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021. Base: 1120.

An eight percentage point lead for change over the status quo ante may not, on the face of it, sound like a great foundation for a radical transformation of society. But even getting back to “normal” would understandably feel like a fantastic achievement and a great relief to many, which may not rule out their also wanting to see changes. Similarly, the 10% who want both change and a return to the status quo may not be as contradictory as it first sounds; people may well want large parts of their lives to ‘return to normal’ while believing that significant aspects of society and their lives should change.

Indeed, the disposition at the end of the second world war, as the historian Paul Addison recounted, was similarly ambiguous. There was a mood that favoured radical social reconstruction so that the sacrifice of millions who died for their country could be repaid, but at the time many longed to return to the political certainties, stabilities and of the inter-war years. Moreover, as the rest of our report demonstrates, even with so many saying they would prefer things to go back to normal, our other findings frequently demonstrate support for policy ideas and government action.

This tension between change and a desire to return to the past is heightened given that many people do recognise the effect that the pandemic has had on British society, transforming both our sense of community and our view of society, not always positively.

Equally, however, there can be multiple motives for not wanting to go back to the status quo. We asked those who said they wanted to see change to explain their answers. Plenty of people clearly saw this in explicitly political terms, such as:

*“Because life was hardly a bed of roses for many people pre pandemic. We need a new beginning and less of the same old where the select few scoff from the trough”*

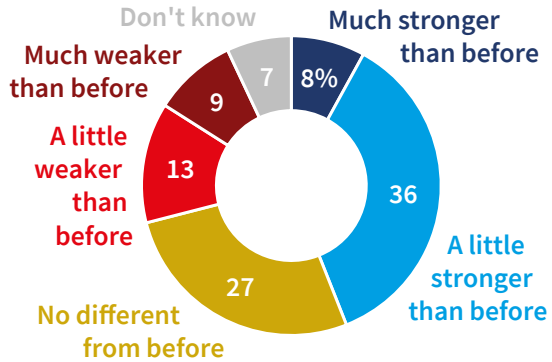
*“Hopefully we have learnt more about the gap between rich and poor, really how many people are homeless and the disparity between poor and well off in terms medical outcomes. If we understand these we could make changes”*

But others saw the need for change in different terms. For some, this was medical (“even when things get back to whatever normal is I will be more reluctant to mix outside family groups and to use public or other forms of mass transport”). Others had taken some positives from the imposed change of lifestyle over the last year, such as the chances to work from home (“A lot has been learned about how effectively people can work from home, given the right support, and how work can be divided more equitably between a greater number of employees”) or see more of their family (“a lot more family time has been achieved”). Yet others noted the increases in community spirit that had occurred: “I think that communities have become closer during the pandemic and it would be good to see this continue”.

As Figure 2 shows, there is plurality support for the idea that ‘community spirit’ (admittedly a nebulous concept) is now stronger than before the pandemic – some 44% believe it has got stronger, double the 22% who think it has weakened, along with 27% who think it has not changed.

**Figure 2: The impact of the pandemic on community spirit**

To what extent, if at all, would you say that **community spirit across the UK has been affected by the pandemic**, compared with how it used to be before the pandemic started?



*Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021. Base: 1120.*

But change is also noticeable in other ways. The Deaton Review of Inequalities, run by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), argued that the pandemic ‘has cruelly exposed huge variations in how easily we are able to weather threats to livelihoods, to educational progress, to physical and mental health. These disparities have been closely correlated with pre-existing inequalities between groups according to their education, income, location and ethnicity – in ways that are often hard to disentangle, but depressingly familiar.’<sup>5</sup>

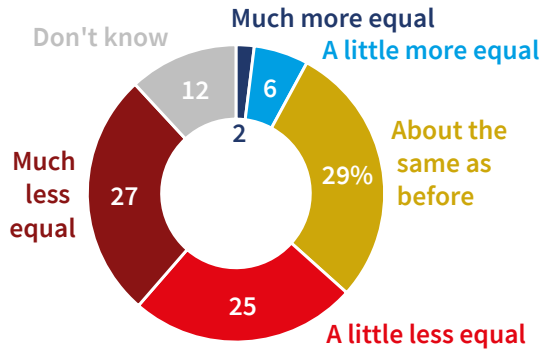
Regarding economic inequality, the public perceive a worsening situation. As Figure 3 shows, half of respondents felt that in terms of economic inequality the UK was now less equal than before the crisis: 27% said much less, and 25% a little less equal. A mere 8% think the crisis has made people more equal.

**Figure 3: The impact of the pandemic on economic inequality**

What **effect, if any,** would you say that the pandemic has had on economic inequality in the UK?

(By economic inequality, we mean the distribution of income, wealth and other assets in society.)

*Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021. Base: 1120.*



### Policy priorities

We now move to more specific questions regarding the change people want to see, trying to understand the public's policy priorities for rebuilding after Covid-19. Figure 4 shows the responses to a question asking what the government's priorities should be when the pandemic is over, in which respondents were asked to select their top two or three priorities.

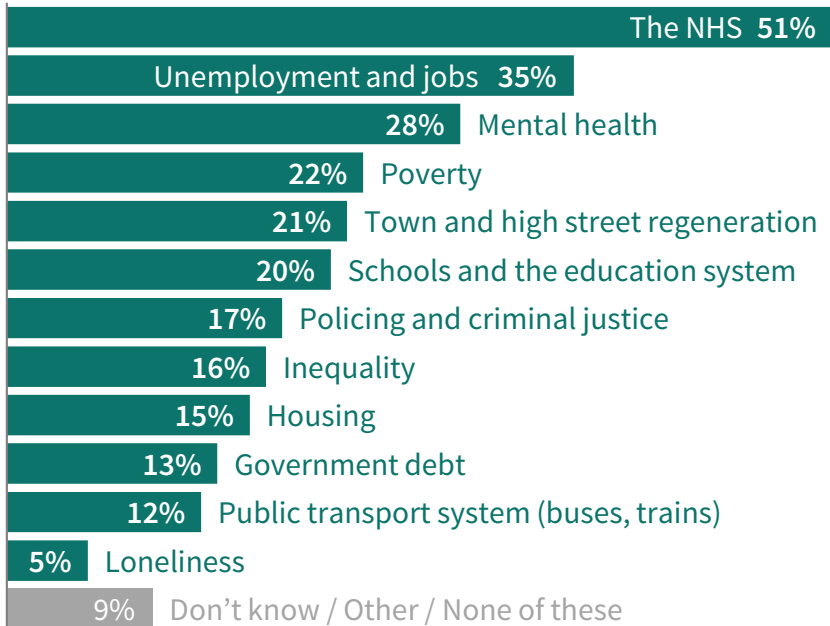
The NHS has been under incredible pressure during the pandemic, and the effects of long-term Covid pressures will mean it will require time to recover, and to tackle the treatment backlog that built up during the crisis. In April 2021, figures from NHS England showed 'that 4.7 million people were waiting to begin treatment at the end of February this year – the highest number since records began in 2007'.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore perhaps little surprise that the NHS was by far the number one priority in our survey, selected by 51% of respondents.

Second comes unemployment and jobs (35%), with mental health in third place (28%). These three priorities are accompanied by much expert analysis pointing to the need for sustained public policy intervention. In relation to jobs and to mental health, there has been a particular focus on young people in the expert analysis, from frontline professionals and thinktanks.<sup>7</sup> Such interventions often include additional funding, a point we return to below.

**Figure 4: The public's priorities for building back better**

The Prime Minister has said he wants to “build back better” after the pandemic crisis is over. Which two or three, if any, of the following should be **the UK government’s main priorities in “building back better”**?

*Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021.  
Base: 1120.*



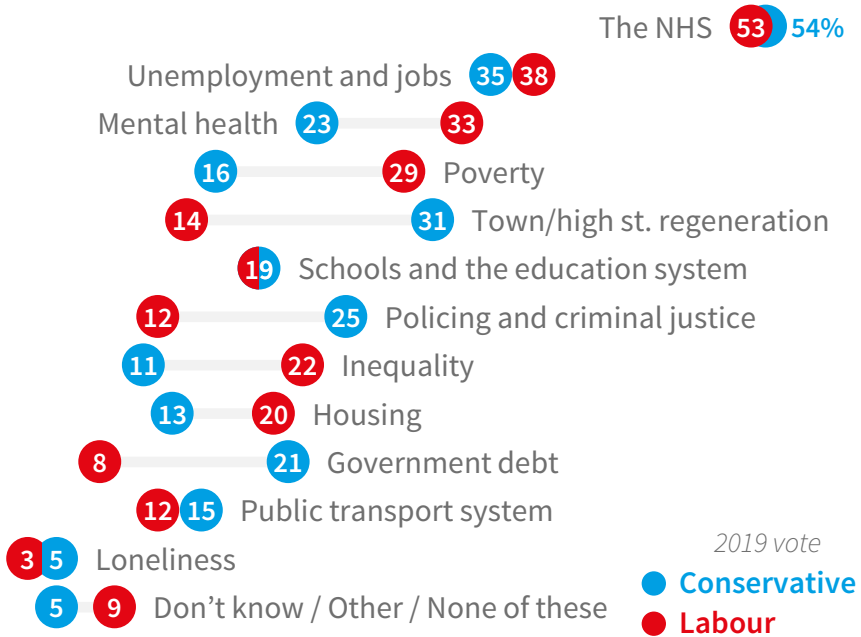
Yet even apparent agreement can mask significant contestation both within and between the parties. We see some of this in Figure 5, which shows the different responses to this question according to which of the two main parties voters supported in the 2019 election. The NHS and unemployment and jobs remain the two most selected priorities by both groups, but below that there is considerable variation. For example, the third priority for 2019 Conservative voters is town and high street regeneration (chosen by 31%, compared to just 14% of 2019 Labour voters).

Similarly, Labour voters gave a higher priority to dealing with poverty (29%, compared to 16% of Conservatives), while Conservatives were more likely to prioritise policing and criminal justice (25% v 12%) and government debt as a priority (21% v 8%).

**Figure 5: Policy priorities for ‘build back better’ by 2019 Conservative and Labour voters**

The Prime Minister has said he wants to “build back better” after the pandemic crisis is over. Which two or three, if any, of the following should be **the UK government’s main priorities in “building back better”**?

Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021.  
Base: 1120.



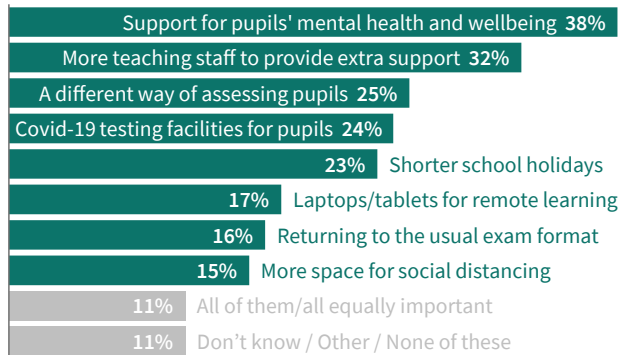
## Priorities in schools

Given the disruptive impact of the pandemic on the education system, and concerns about the impact of the crisis on young people's futures, we asked specifically about policy priorities for schools. Not only was mental health the third top priority overall (in Figure 6), additional support for pupils' mental health and wellbeing is the public's top concern when looking forward to the new school year in September, selected by 38% of those we surveyed. This was closely followed by additional teaching staff to support students (32%), while a quarter say students' educational attainment should be assessed in different ways with fewer examinations when schools reopen after the summer break.

**Figure 6: Totals for policy priorities in schools**

Which two or three of the following, if any, do you think should be **priorities for schools when the new school year starts in September?**

*Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021.  
Base: 1120.*





## **Tax and spend**

Even if the public were clear about what they believe the government's priorities should be, addressing them entails dealing with choices and complex trade-offs. We therefore also asked about tax and spending, which after a decade of relative austerity in the British state, remains a hotly contested issue. The Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, said in his Budget 2021 speech that 'the amount we've borrowed is comparable only with the amount we borrowed during the two world wars. It is going to be the work of many governments, over many decades, to pay it back'.<sup>8</sup> It is currently unclear to what extent the government will press the issues of government borrowing and debt in the political debates to come, but we wanted to understand the public's views – including their current judgement on the past, specifically the post-2010 'austerity' of David Cameron's governments.

We first asked our survey respondents in which areas of UK public spending they would like the government to spend more after the pandemic than it was doing before, to spend less, or to spend roughly the same amount. The responses are in Figure 7.

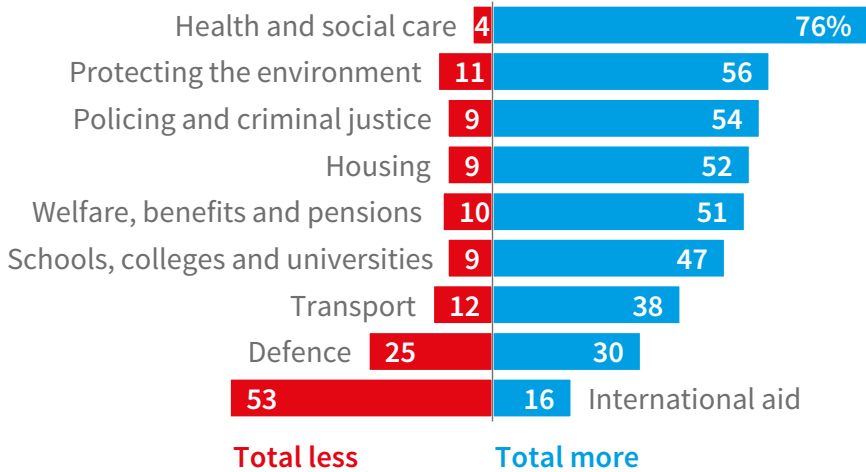
Not surprisingly given what we have seen already, 76% of people supported either a little more or much more spending on health and social care. There was already growing awareness in public policy debates about the condition of the NHS prior to the pandemic. Social care funding in particular is viewed by many experts as a long-term problem where successive governments have failed to take decisive action.

But in addition, there was more widespread support for greater spending. It stood at 50% or more in the following policy areas: protecting the environment (56%), policing and criminal justice (54%), housing (52%) and welfare, benefits and pensions (51%).

**Figure 7: The public's spending priorities**

For the following areas, **would you like the government to spend more than it was doing before, to spend less**, or to spend roughly the same amount as before the pandemic?

*Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021. Base: 1120.*



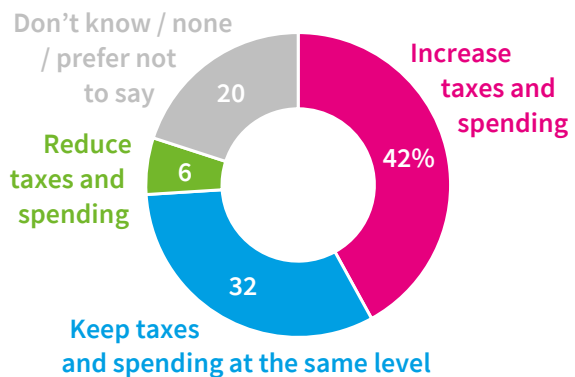
More respondents (40%) said that spending on defence should remain at the same level than thought it ought to increase (30%), along with transport, where 38% said spending should increase, and 46% said it should remain the same. The only place where there was a desire for lower spending was international aid, where 53% said the government should be spending less. The last will be of little surprise to anyone who has studied public attitudes to overseas aid over recent years – but it does suggest a degree of popular support for the government’s decision to reduce the aid budget in a period of domestic economic contraction. Moreover, collectively the findings in Figure 7 would appear to indicate a desire for increased government spending in general – given that majorities of the public want to see increases in expenditure in almost all of the government’s big-ticket items, with no countervailing cuts elsewhere, save for the relatively tiny international aid budget.

We tried to test this explicitly with a question exploring overall levels of taxation and public spending *after* the crisis compared to *before* the crisis. We looked at levels of tax and public spending – with a future government’s choice presented as between reducing taxes and spending, keeping taxes and spending broadly the same, or increasing taxes and spending.

As Figure 8 demonstrates only 6% of people said that the government should reduce taxes and spending in pursuit of a markedly smaller state. More of our respondents (42%) favoured increasing taxes and spending while 32% opted to keep them at the same level. It also confirms findings from recent iterations of the British Social Attitudes surveys, which have also found growing support for increases in taxation and expenditure, and a longstanding pattern of very few people wanting to reduce taxes and spending. In relation to increasing tax and spend, or keeping them the same, there is good evidence that the public tend to react ‘thermostatically’ to changes in the level of tax and spending.<sup>9</sup> Sharp rises in spending and taxes *could* provoke a swing back to greater scepticism towards public expenditure and higher taxes. But for now, there seems to be a general, if not overwhelming, preference for greater public spending.

**Figure 8: Preferences for tax and spend levels after the pandemic**

After the pandemic, suppose the government had to choose between these three options. Which do you think it should choose? **Please think about what you would like the future levels of tax and spending to be after the pandemic compared with the levels before the pandemic, not compared with during the pandemic.**

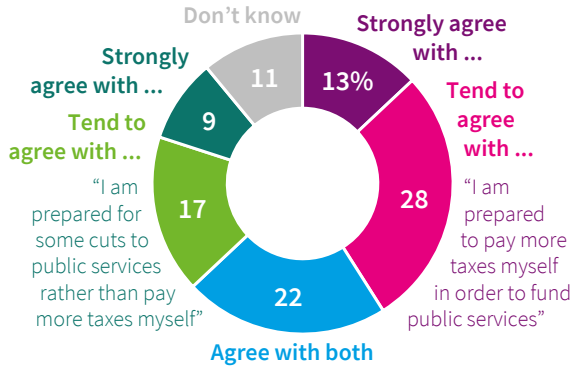


*Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021. Base: 1120.*

To understand the current public mood from a different angle, we also reformulated this question to examine views about the individual's personal contribution to tax in order to ensure adequate funding of public services. This produced broadly similar results. A total of 41% said – at least hypothetically – that they were prepared to pay more tax to support public services, although now 26% were prepared to countenance some cuts in public services to avoid paying higher taxes (compared to just 6% when the question was asked in the abstract), while 33% didn't know or wanted a combination of the two.

**Figure 9: Totals for tax and spend (pay tax/spending choice) after pandemic**

The current Covid-19 pandemic has required high levels of government spending. Following the crisis, and when the UK Government expects a lot of emergency spending to come to an end, **which of these statements do you agree with the most** in relation to future levels of tax and public spending, compared with their levels before the pandemic began?

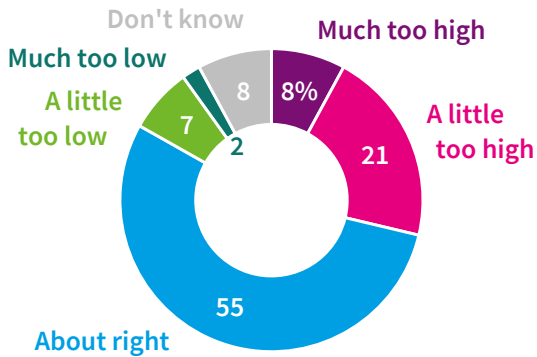


*Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021. Base: 1120.*

We posed a third related question: asking respondents about how much tax they currently paid. As Figure 10 shows, a majority, 55%, concluded that the amount of tax they pay is at about the right level. It is striking that the numbers who believe they currently pay too little tax are very low, at 9%, noticeably lower than the 41% who said they were prepared to pay more taxes to fund public services (let alone the desire for extra spending shown in Figure 7). These findings are not necessarily contradictory. It may be that people think they pay the correct amount of tax for the services they *currently* get – but would be willing to pay more if it produced better public services. Alternatively, it may be that 41% are prepared to countenance higher taxes to pay for public services – in the belief that it won't be them that must pay. Or indeed, it could be a combination of these or other explanations.

**Figure 10 Views on personal tax levels**

On balance, would you say that the amount of tax that you and your family have to pay is too high, too low or about right?



*Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021. Base: 1120.*

### **Politicians and public spending**

This attitude to spending also came through when we asked respondents to consider the period when David Cameron was Prime Minister and George Osborne was Chancellor, noting that government spending on many (but not all) public services and benefits was cut to reduce the deficit.

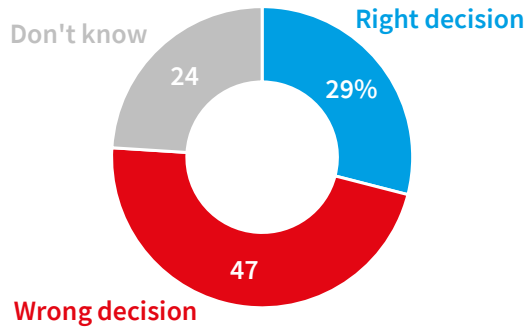
Figure 11 shows the public's view of the Cameron and Osborne era. The 'austerity' policies and politics of the post-2010 era are largely viewed negatively: 47% of people say that cutting public spending on public services and welfare benefits following the 2008 financial crisis was the wrong decision, just 29% say the right decision, along with 24% who don't know. Even among 2019 Conservative voters, there was only a narrow margin of support for the cuts (by 40% to 37%).

If the 2017 election marked the point when the public grew weary of 'austerity', their judgement today suggests that view has been consolidated.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 11: Totals for right/wrong decision on post-2010 public spending reductions**

Please think about the period following the global financial crisis, when David Cameron was Prime Minister and George Osborne was Chancellor. During this period, government spending on many (but not all) public services and benefits was cut to reduce the deficit. **Do you think it was the right or wrong decision to cut public spending to reduce the deficit?**

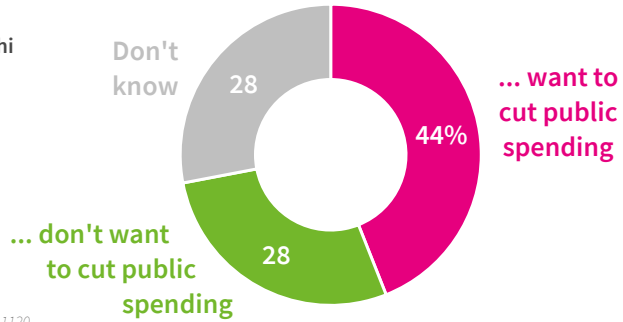
*Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021. Base: 1120.*



We then asked about the present government: did respondents think the *current* Prime Minister and Chancellor want to cut government spending or not, in order to reduce the deficit? The plurality response (from 44%) was that Johnson and Sunak do want to cut public spending, with just 28% saying the opposite, along with 28% who didn't know. But among 2019 Conservative voters – the coalition that the Prime Minister desperately needs to maintain and consolidate ahead of the next election - these figures were almost the exact opposite: 29% said that the PM and Chancellor wanted to cut public spending, but 42% said they did not.

**Figure 12: Totals for PM/Chancellor do want to cut/don't want to cut public spending**

**Do you think the current Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and the current Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, want to cut government spending on many public services to reduce the deficit, or do you think they do not want to cut spending?**



*Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021. Base: 1120.*

In general, then, the public broadly want to see spending increases. There is less support for tax increases to pay for these spending increases, although the prevailing mood indicates that the present government is unlikely to suffer significant political fall-out from the tax rises enshrined in the 2021 Budget.

But if the government do cut spending – and of course, the context is already very different as they are following on from previous Conservative prime ministers and chancellors – they will need to consider exactly how they explain those cuts to the public. They will have to persuade voters that events beyond their control have made it necessary to retrench the state, and that escalating levels of public debt would damage long-term prosperity and living standards. But in doing so, they would be paddling against the tide of public sentiment, and potentially reminding the public of the (still very recent) round of austerity.

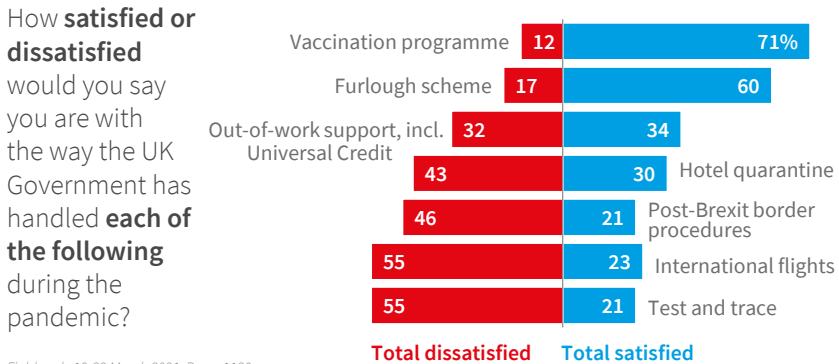
## 2. Politics and policy in the pandemic

In addition to priorities, we are also interested in public perceptions of performance – not in the least because the success or otherwise of government policies will have some effect on the future state of our society and public services. The UK government has created a number of large-scale policy programmes during the pandemic. At the time of the March 2021 Budget, the Chancellor noted that the government announced over £280 billion in additional support for the economy – including the furlough scheme, support for the self-employed and business loans. NHS Test and Trace was given funding of £22 billion for 2021-21, with a further £15 billion committed for 2021-22.<sup>11</sup>

Many of these government programmes have received significant media attention and some critical commentary – perhaps Test and Trace being one notable example given concerns over its relative lack of effectiveness and the cost of the programme.<sup>12</sup> The vaccination programme has, in contrast, been widely praised across the political spectrum.

We wanted to ascertain the level of satisfaction and dissatisfaction across a number of areas of government policy delivery – from now well-known programmes like furlough, to areas where policy has been developed more slowly, and changed over time – such as the management of international travel, and the system of ‘hotel quarantine’.<sup>13</sup>

**Figure 13: Satisfaction and dissatisfaction with UK government handling of policy areas**





The results in Figure 13 largely confirmed what we might have assumed given general perceptions of the effectiveness of government policies during the pandemic. The vaccination programme leads the way in terms of public satisfaction: 71% are satisfied, 12% total dissatisfied, 15% are neither, and 2% don't know. The furlough scheme also has positive results: 60% in total are satisfied, 17% are dissatisfied, 20% are neither, and 3% don't know.

Respondents were more equivocal about the government's support for those out of work, including through Universal Credit: 34% are satisfied, 32% dissatisfied, 25% neither, and 9% don't know. Nonetheless, the results indicate that voters believe the government has done a reasonable job in shielding citizens from the economic, health and social insecurities unleashed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In other areas of government delivery, however, there was greater dissatisfaction with performance. The Test and Trace programme, and the approach to deciding whether to restrict flights from other countries,<sup>14</sup> both had 55% being dissatisfied with the government's handling of these issues.<sup>15</sup> And more respondents were dissatisfied than satisfied over delivery of both the system of 'hotel quarantine', and the management of new procedures at the border following Brexit – where new rules, checks and paperwork began on new year's day 2021.

We also asked about providing data and information to the public during the pandemic. 46% of people said the UK government had done a good job, 32% a bad job and 20% neither good nor bad. Asked the same of local councils, 35% said they had done a good job, 24% a bad job, and 32% neither good nor bad.

### **The role of the private sector in public service delivery**

The government's response to Covid-19 has involved a mixture of private and public sector delivery, with contracts worth billions of pounds agreed, leading to a slew of stories about those contracts, performance and inefficiency – with the implication that things would all be much better if the state was doing it instead.

We wanted to see the extent to which the public did or did not object to the involvement of private sector companies in dealing with the pandemic. We asked to what extent respondents agreed to three statements – two of which were fairly unequivocal in favour of either private or public provision, and one of which was more conditional, asking whether respondents would back private-sector involvement if it helped the government response to the pandemic.

For this last statement, we also split the sample – asking half of respondents the statement without any reference to profit, with the other half being given a statement mentioning profit. As Figure 14 shows, the most popular options were the conditional ones. Explicit reference to profit being made by companies lowered support, but even here the plurality option was in favour of private sector involvement.

People therefore appear to take a pragmatic view of the boundary between the public and the private sector in the provision of public services. They do not subscribe to a ‘public good, private bad’ worldview but equally, they do not believe it is always necessary to replace the public sector. Their support is conditional: they need to be convinced that private sector involvement will improve the quality of the service and value for money for taxpayers.

### Figure 14: Attitudes towards private sector companies

Here are some statements about **private sector companies and the government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic**. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each?



Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021. Base: 1120.

\* Half of respondents were read the statement with the second clause, and half were read the statement without this clause.

We also asked people about the level of financial support given to different types of business during the pandemic. Has the amount of financial support been about right, too much, or too little? Half of people (49%) felt that live entertainment venues such as theatres and music venues had received too little financial support – 26% believed it had been a bit too little, 24% far too little. Live entertainment venues were followed closely by pubs – with a total of 44% thinking pubs had received too little financial support. While 41% of people felt that restaurants had received too little support, 36% felt the support had been about the right amount. For shops selling non-essential goods, more thought the support was about right (39%) than too little (36%). For supermarkets, 48% thought the support had been about right, 25% thought it had been too much, and only 9% thought the financial support had been too little.

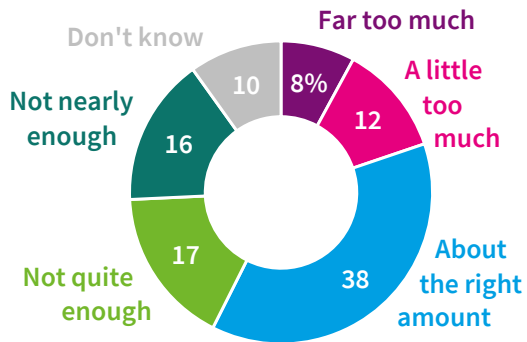
### Following the science?

Another ever-present debate since the pandemic began has been the extent to which the British government has ‘followed the science’ in handling the pandemic – a regular assertion from members of the government from the prime minister down. The phrase has given rise to much analysis and debate, often gauging the extent to which the government *is* following the science, and occasionally questioning just how straightforward such an approach actually is.<sup>16</sup>

It is widely recognised that scientific evidence is itself contested and well-qualified scientists may legitimately disagree about how best to deal with a major pandemic. Moreover, it has remained as true during the pandemic as it was before that while political leaders are provided with advice, it is down to Ministers to decide policy.

**Figure 15: guided by scientific advice**

During the Covid-19 pandemic, do you think that Ministers in the **UK Government have been guided by scientific advice** too much compared with other factors, too little compared with other factors, or about the right amount?



*Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021. Base: 1120.*

As Figure 15 shows, on this, the public are divided. More people think the government have got it wrong than right, but their critics are split between those who think they have been guided by science too much and those who think they have done so too little. The 38% who judge the government has been guided by the science ‘about the right amount’ are followed closely by 33% who believe members of the government have been guided by the science ‘not quite enough’ or ‘not nearly enough’, along with 20% who think that the government has followed the science too much.

## The opposition

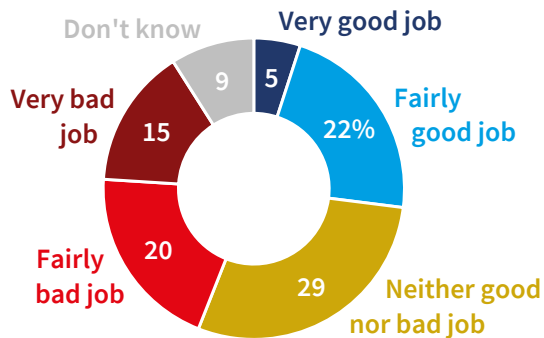
If the pandemic has been a challenge for the government, it has also, in a very different way, been a challenge for the opposition. We posed a range of questions about the strategy of the opposition, and the nature of Westminster politics in a time of national crisis.

In particular, we were concerned with perceptions of whether the Labour leader, Keir Starmer, had succeeded in his approach of ‘constructive opposition’ during the crisis – the approach he suggested Labour had taken in a summer 2020 article.<sup>17</sup> We defined ‘constructive opposition’ as ‘comments and questions that have a useful purpose in getting the government to do its job better’. We were also interested in whether respondents were in favour of a more non-partisan ‘cross-party’ approach to political debate and decision-making following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the sense the country was engulfed by a national emergency.

As Figure 16 shows, while the largest group of voters (35%) believe that Starmer is doing either a fairly or very bad job, the public are again clearly divided. 29% think that he is doing neither a good nor bad job, while 27% think that he is doing either a fairly good or very good job. There is of course a big difference among 2019 Conservative and Labour voters – 49% of 2019 Conservative voters opted for a fairly or very bad job, while 48% of 2019 Labour voters opted for a fairly or very good job. Even so, the response of 2019 Labour voters is hardly a strong endorsement for this approach.

**Figure 16: Totals for ‘constructive opposition’**

During the Covid-19 pandemic, **do you think the Leader of the Labour Party, Keir Starmer, has done a good or bad job at providing ‘constructive opposition’** – in other words, comments and questions that have a useful purpose in getting the government to do its job better?



*Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021. Base: 1120.*

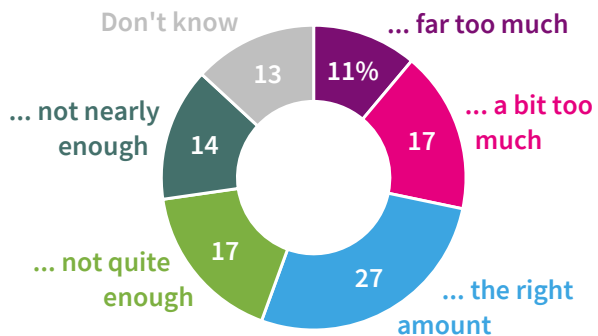
Starmer has come under noticeable pressure from some within his own party for his political strategy during the pandemic – one recent article, marking a year of his leadership, suggested ‘the Labour leader’s critics claim it has been a year of punches pulled, and opportunities missed’.<sup>18</sup> Polling examining the Labour leader’s performance has noted that Starmer’s favourability rating has declined sharply in recent months, and that opinion among voters is mixed on how well he is performing.<sup>19</sup> Other polling carried out by the Mile End Institute in London found that a large number of voters had little idea who Starmer was or what his attributes as a leader were.<sup>20</sup>

In this survey, we focused specifically on perceptions of whether Starmer has criticised the government too little, too much, or has got the balance about right. The results indicate a dilemma for the Labour leader as to whether constructive opposition has led him to be too uncritical of the government. Opinion is deeply divided: 27% of people said that he has criticised the government broadly the right amount; 29% say that he has been a bit or far too critical; and 31% say that he has not been quite or nearly as critical as he should have been. In terms of 2019 voters, the ‘Starmer dilemma’ is particularly obvious. The Labour leader needs to win back some of the votes of people who opted for the Conservatives in 2019, while holding on to Labour’s 2019 voters. Yet, perhaps unsurprisingly, both groups have very different views on Starmer’s approach in holding the government to account: 53% of 2019 Conservative voters judged that Starmer attacked the government too much, while 50% of 2019 Labour voters believed there had been too little criticism of the government’s handling of the crisis.

**Figure 17: Views on Keir Starmer’s criticism of government**

Which of these statements is closest to your view of how Keir Starmer has done his job as Leader of the Opposition during the pandemic?

**“Keir Starmer has criticised the government...”**

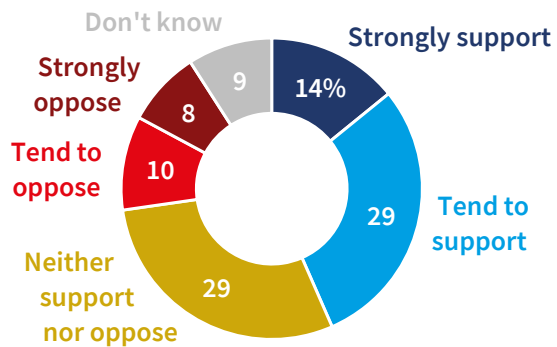


*Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021. Base: 1120.*

Starmer’s strategy of ‘constructive opposition’ relates to the belief that in a time of crisis, the public want to see politicians who are willing to engage constructively in the national interest. We asked whether people would support more of a role (compared to ‘normal’) being given to opposition parties in decision-making in UK government during the crisis. Opposition to such a proposal was small – only 18% of people tended to be opposed or were strongly opposed to the idea, compared to 43% tending to support or strongly supporting it. Perhaps not surprisingly, this idea was more favoured by supporters of parties currently in opposition (66% of Labour supporters and 60% of Lib Dems) than Conservatives (32%), although even this last figure was only marginally lower than the percentage of Conservatives who opposed the idea (35%); another 34% either neither supported or opposed, or did not know how they felt about it.

**Figure 18: Totals for support/opposition to more opposition involvement in decision-making**

How strongly, if at all, would you support or oppose **opposition parties in the UK Parliament being given more involvement in government decision-making than normal** until the pandemic has been dealt with?



*Fieldwork: 19-22 March 2021. Base: 1120.*

## Concluding remarks

Both the prime minister and the leader of the opposition have – to varying degrees – signalled a belief that after the current crisis Britain need not ‘go back to normal’. Instead, this should be a moment for change, though unsurprisingly the nature of that change often fits with pre-existing policy commitments or ideological viewpoints.

Our aim with this short report has been to present early indications of what the public may want in any effort to rebuild from the crisis. In a sense, it provides some indication – a snapshot – of the ideas and beliefs that could be engaged with at the political level to remedy longstanding inequalities, and growing societal problems. As we have suggested throughout this report, including when looking specifically at the public’s top three priorities to ‘build back better’, there is also expert analysis and evidence to back up the need for action.

Over the coming months and years, it seems inevitable that this frame for public discourse – how to rebuild – will remain important, and a key area of political debate. We believe that an interested, engaged public, is ready to consider and evaluate new ideas from politicians and others engaged with public policy. We hope to be analysing some of those ideas, and the public’s response, in future work.

# Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Press release (2021) Prime Minister and Chancellor launch new Business Council: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-and-chancellor-launch-new-business-council>
- <sup>2</sup> Starmer K (2021) Speech on A New Chapter for Britain: <https://labour.org.uk/press/full-text-of-keir-starmer-speech-on-a-new-chapter-for-britain/>
- <sup>3</sup> Hennessy P (2020) After Covid-19: <https://www.qmul.ac.uk/mei/news-and-opinion/items/after-covid19---lord-peter-hennessy.html>
- <sup>4</sup> For example, the Covid PACER project (<https://covidpacer.wordpress.com/team/>) and the recent work of academics at King's College London, such as *Unequal Britain* (<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/unequal-britain.pdf>)
- <sup>5</sup> The IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities (2021) A New Year's message, *Institute for Fiscal Studies*: <https://www.ifs.org.uk/inequality/the-ifs-deaton-review-of-inequalities-a-new-years-message/>
- <sup>6</sup> O'Dowd A (2021) *BMJ* 2021;373:n995 [https://www.bmj.com/content/373/bmj.n995?ijkey=d912392d1845269199e8e2c2104b8d7802b3f19f&keytype=tf\\_ipsecsha](https://www.bmj.com/content/373/bmj.n995?ijkey=d912392d1845269199e8e2c2104b8d7802b3f19f&keytype=tf_ipsecsha)
- <sup>7</sup> For example, in mental health, the president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCP) has said 'the extent of the mental health crisis is terrifying, but it will likely get a lot worse before it gets better'. According to their analysis, nearly 400,000 children and 2.2 million adults have sought help for mental health problems during the pandemic. Again, people under the age of 25 appear to have been most negatively affected. Dr Bernadka Dubicka, chair of the child and adolescent faculty at the RCP –has said that 'our children and young people are bearing the brunt of the mental health crisis caused by the pandemic and are at risk of lifelong mental illness'. See press release (2021) Country in the grip of a mental health crisis with children worst affected, new analysis finds, Royal College of Psychiatrists: <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/news-and-features/latest-news/detail/2021/04/08/country-in-the-grip-of-a-mental-health-crisis-with-children-worst-affected-new-analysis-finds>  
With regard to jobs, see a recent report by the Resolution Foundation on youth unemployment: Henehan K (2021) *Uneven Steps*. Resolution Foundation: <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/uneven-steps/>
- <sup>8</sup> Sunak R (2021) Budget Speech 2021: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/budget-speech-2021>



- <sup>9</sup> British Social Attitudes 37 (2020) *Key time series*: [https://bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39399/bsa37\\_key-time-series.pdf](https://bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39399/bsa37_key-time-series.pdf)
- <sup>10</sup> Cowley P and Kavanagh D (2018) *The British General Election of 2017*. Palgrave
- <sup>11</sup> House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2021) *Covid-19: Test, track and trace (part 1)*, House of Commons: p.9: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4976/documents/50058/default/>
- <sup>12</sup> BBC News (2021) Covid-19: Boris Johnson defends NHS Test and Trace after MPs' criticism: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-56348558>
- <sup>13</sup> While there have been attempts to ensure a 'four nations approach', there have also been divergences between the UK and devolved governments. An exploration of devolution and responding to the Covid-19 pandemic can be found in Sargeant J (2020) *Co-ordination and divergence*, *Institute for Government*: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/coordination-divergence-devolution-coronavirus.pdf>
- <sup>14</sup> A BBC News 'reality check' gives a good summary of a longstanding debate about travel restrictions – see BBC News (2021) 'Covid variants: Why hasn't the UK banned all international flights?', <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/explainers-55659926>
- <sup>15</sup> On international travel, a report by the Home Affairs Select Committee in August 2020 found that while it was 'understandable that the Government did not consider it practical or effective simply to restrict flights... the failure properly to consider the possibility of imposing stricter requirements on those arriving – such as mandatory self-isolation, increased screening, targeted testing or enforceable quarantine – was a serious error'. Home Affairs Select Committee (2020), *Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 (coronavirus): management of the borders*, House of Commons: pp.3-4: <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/2250/documents/20957/default/>
- <sup>16</sup> For an example, see the BBC programme 'Lockdown 1.0 – Following the Science?', which contained a range of views on these points: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000pjr1>
- <sup>17</sup> Starmer K (2020) The government must up its game to prepare for a second wave of Covid-19, *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/aug/04/government-second-wave-covid-19-labour-opposition-no-10-lives-jobs>
- <sup>18</sup> Stewart H and Elgot J (2021) Amid unease on the left, Starmer aims to 'bring Labour home', *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/apr/02/amid-unease-on-the-left-starmer-aims-to-bring-labour-home>
- <sup>19</sup> Smith M (2021) One year of Keir: how has Starmer done leading Labour? *YouGov*: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2021/04/03/one-year-keir-how-has-starmer-done-leading-labour>
- <sup>20</sup> Diamond P (2021) 'Is Keir Starmer any good? Don't ask Londoners', *The Conversation*: <https://theconversation.com/is-keir-starmer-any-good-dont-ask-londoners-159464>

# Appendix

## survey questions featured in this report

**Q1. Government Ministers have said that dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic means 'following the science' – in other words, being guided by scientific evidence and advice. Others have said that many decisions require judgements that should be taken by politicians, weighing up the scientific advice against other factors such as the economic or social impact of their decisions. During the Covid-19 pandemic, do you think that Ministers in the UK Government have been guided by scientific advice too much compared with other factors, too little compared with other factors, or about the right amount?**

Have been guided by scientific advice far too much compared with other factors

Have been guided by scientific advice a little too much compared with other factors

Have been guided by scientific advice about the right amount

Have been guided by scientific advice a little too little compared with other factors

Have been guided by scientific advice far too little compared with other factors

Don't know

**Q2. During the Covid-19 pandemic, do you think the Leader of the Labour Party, Keir Starmer, has done a good or bad job at providing ‘constructive opposition’ – in other words, comments and questions that have a useful purpose in getting the government to do its job better?**

Very good job

Fairly good job

Neither good nor bad job

Fairly bad job

Very job

Don't know

**Q3. Which of these statements is closest to your view of how Keir Starmer has done his job as Leader of the Opposition during the pandemic?**

He has criticised the government far too much

He has criticised the government a bit too much

He has criticised the government about the right amount

He has not criticised the government quite enough

He has not criticised the government nearly enough

Don't know

**Q4. How strongly, if at all, would you support or oppose opposition parties in the UK Parliament being given more involvement in government decision-making than normal until the pandemic has been dealt with?**

Strongly support

Tend to support

Neither support nor oppose

Tend to oppose

Strongly oppose

Don't know

**Q5. Now, thinking about government spending in England/ Scotland/Wales, [In Sc/W ask: whether by the UK government or by the Scottish/Welsh government], do you think that the amount of financial support that has been given to each of the following types of business during the pandemic has been too much, too little or about the right amount?**

(a) Pubs

(b) Live entertainment venues such as theatres and music venues

(c) Restaurants

(d) Shops that sell only non-essential goods and services

(e) Supermarkets

Has been far too much financial support

Has been a little too much financial support

Has been about the right amount of financial support

Has been a little too little financial support

Has been far too little financial support

Don't know

**Q6. How satisfied or dissatisfied would you say you are with the way the UK Government has handled each of the following during the pandemic?**

- (a) Government furlough scheme, typically supporting 80% of an employee's pay to help employers continue to employ people who cannot work because of lockdown
- (b) Support for people out of work, including Universal Credit
- (c) The COVID-19 vaccination programme
- (d) Deciding whether to ban or restrict flights from other countries
- (e) The system of hotel quarantine for passengers arriving from overseas
- (f) The COVID-19 test and trace programme
- (g) Managing new procedures at the border following Brexit

Very satisfied

Fairly satisfied

Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied

Fairly dissatisfied

Very dissatisfied

Don't know

**Q7 And do you think each of the following have done a good or bad job at providing you with the data and information you have needed during the pandemic?**

a) Your local council

b) The UK Government

Very good job

Fairly good job

Neither good nor bad job

Fairly bad job

Very bad job

Don't know

**Q8. Here are some statements about private sector companies and the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree with each?**

A) The government should not use private sector companies in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic under any circumstances.

SPLIT SAMPLE 1: B) If a private sector company can improve the effectiveness of the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic it should be allowed to do so

SPLIT SAMPLE 2: C) If a private sector company can improve the effectiveness of the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic it should be allowed to do so, even if it makes a profit at the same time

D) The government should always try to use private sector companies instead of the public sector in its response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Strongly agree

Tend to agree

Neither agree nor disagree

Tend to disagree

Strongly disagree

Don't know

**Q9. On balance, would you prefer it if life goes back to how it was before the crisis once the pandemic is over, or do you want things to be different?**

Same as before

Different from before

Other/neither/both

Don't know

**Q10. Why do you say that?**

SPECIFY

Don't know

**Q11. The Prime Minister has said he wants to “build back better” after the pandemic crisis is over. Which two or three, if any, of the following should be the UK government’s main priorities in “building back better”?**

Schools and the education system

The NHS

Policing and criminal justice

Public transport system (buses, trains)

Housing

Town and high street regeneration

Poverty

Inequality

Unemployment and jobs

Government debt

Loneliness

Mental health

Other (SPECIFY)

None

Don't know

**Q12. For each of the following areas of UK government spending, would you like the government to spend more after the pandemic than it was doing before, to spend less, or to spend roughly the same amount as before the pandemic?**

- (a) Health and social care
- (b) Welfare, benefits and pensions
- (c) Schools, colleges and universities
- (d) Defence
- (e) Policing and criminal justice
- (f) Housing
- (g) Protecting the environment
- (h) Transport
- (i) International aid

Much more

A little more

About the same

A little less

Much less

Don't know



**Q13. As you may know, the current Covid-19 pandemic has required high levels of government spending. Following the crisis, and when the UK Government expects a lot of emergency spending to come to an end, which of these statements do you agree with the most in relation to future levels of tax and public spending, compared with their levels before the pandemic began?**

Statement A: "I am prepared to pay more taxes myself in order to fund public services"

Statement B: "I am prepared for some cuts to public services rather than pay more taxes myself".

Strongly agree with statement A

Tend to agree with statement A

Agree with both A and B equally

Tend to agree with statement B

Strongly agree with statement B

Don't know

**Q14. Please now think about the period following the global financial crisis, when David Cameron was Prime Minister and George Osborne was Chancellor. During this period, government spending on many (but not all) public services and benefits was cut to reduce the deficit. Do you think it was the right or wrong decision to cut public spending to reduce the deficit?**

Right decision

Wrong decision

Don't know

**Q15 And now thinking about today, do you think the current Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and the current Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, want to cut government spending on many public services to reduce the deficit, or do you think they do not want to cut spending?**

Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak do want to cut public spending

Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak do not want to cut public spending

Don't know

**Q16. After the Covid-19 pandemic, suppose the government had to choose between these three options. Which do you think it should choose? Please think about what you would like the future levels of tax and spending to be after the pandemic compared with the levels before the pandemic, not compared with the levels of spending during the pandemic.**

Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits, compared with the levels of tax and spend before the pandemic

Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as they were before the pandemic

Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits, compared with the levels of tax and spend before the pandemic

None

Don't know

Prefer not to say

**Q17. On balance, would you say that the amount of tax that you and your family have to pay is too high, too low or about right?**

Much too high

A little too high

About right

A little too low

Much too low

Don't know

**Q18. Which of the following best describes how you were working just before the pandemic started early last year?**

I mostly or always worked away from my home

I mostly or always worked from my own home

Sometimes I worked at home and sometimes away from my home

I was not working

Don't know

ASK ALL WHO WERE WORKING

**Q19. And in which of these ways would you prefer to work once the pandemic is over?**

I would prefer to work completely from home

I would prefer to work from home more than I used to do

I would prefer to work from home about as much I used to do

I would prefer to work from home less than I used to do

I would prefer to work completely away from home

Other

Don't know

Not applicable (the nature of my job means I don't have a choice where I have to work)

**Q20. To what extent, if at all, would you say that community spirit across the UK has been affected by the pandemic, compared with how it used to be before the pandemic started?**

It is much stronger than it used to be

It is a little stronger than it used to be

It is no different from before

It is a little weaker than it used to be

It is much weaker than it used to be

Don't know

**Q21. In what ways have you noticed a change in the strength of community spirit?**

SPECIFY

Don't know

**Q22. And what effect, if any, would you say that the pandemic has had on economic inequality in the UK? (By economic inequality, we mean the distribution of income, wealth and other assets in society.)**

It is much more equal than it used to be

It is a little more equal than it used to be

It is about the same as it was before

It is a little less equal than it used to be

It is much less equal than it used to be

Don't know

**Q23. As you may know, schools have had to close twice during the pandemic to many pupils, and some pupils have also had to stay at home to self-isolate for periods when schools have been open. Which two or three of the following, if any, do you think should be priorities for schools in [England/Scotland/Wales] when the new school year starts in September?**

More teaching staff to provide extra support for pupils who have had their learning disrupted

More space (such as temporary buildings) to help with social distancing

Support for pupils' mental health and wellbeing

Covid-19 testing facilities for pupils

Laptops/tablets for remote learning

A return to the usual format of examinations for pupils due to sit them

A different way of assessing pupils in the future, with fewer examinations

Shorter school holidays

Other

All of them/all equally important

None of these

Don't know



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