

SEALING THE DEAL

Labour, the electorate
and its plans for power

JULY 2023



Foreword – Kevin Craig, Founder



For those who care about our country and its institutions, a competitive political landscape is important, not least because it leads to better policies and forces higher quality Governments. It makes the UK a better place to do business.

Keir Starmer's transformative leadership of the Labour Party has dramatically changed its fortunes and its attitudes towards business, job creation, aspiration and a long-term industrial strategy. By October 2022, Starmer's team was ahead by up to 30 points. Business is clamouring to get its voice heard at every level of the Labour movement.

Yet despite leading in the polls for months there's a lingering concern (shared in Labour's senior circles) that Labour is yet to seal the deal with voters ahead of the next election. The gap between the parties has narrowed in recent months. With a relatively competent Tory administration in place there is still speculation that the race for No10 could tighten further over the next 18 months.

Despite everything that has happened in the past few years, there is a strong sense that voters are holding back from wholehearted commitment to Labour. Why is that? Why isn't the next election a foregone conclusion?

In this PLMR Insights paper we report on unique polling we've conducted to try to answer some of these questions.

We also look at what a Labour Government might bring, and explain how PLMR can help you engage with Starmer's Labour Party.

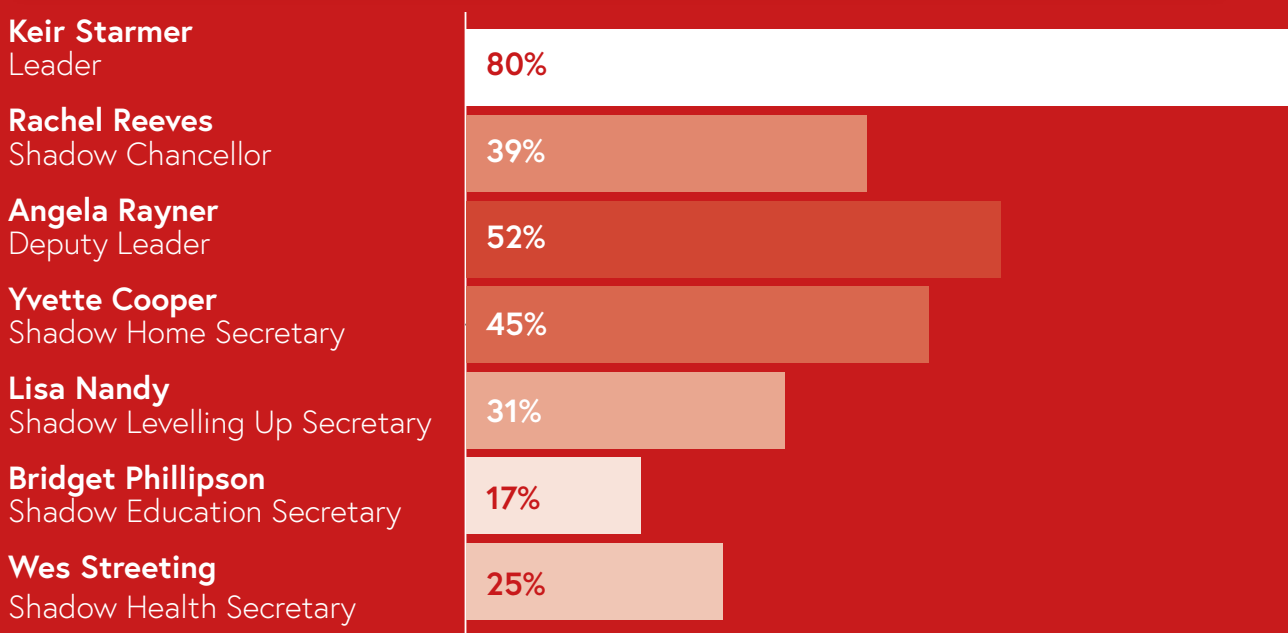


Polling: Sealing the deal

At the beginning of June 2023, PLMR commissioned Savanta ComRes to poll more than 2,000 voters from all over the UK, asking them how well they knew key figures in the Labour leadership and which of the main party leaders they would like to meet for a coffee.

We wanted to find out if Labour hadn't 'sealed the deal' with the electorate because people simply don't know the top team who hope to be running the country in 18 months' time.

Percentage who said they were "very" or "quite" familiar with the following politicians:



Labour will rightly see the level of familiarity with Sir Keir Starmer as a triumph. It can be hard for an Opposition Leader to cut through with the public, and he would appear to have done so. It is the relatively low percentages of people recognising the other leading lights that the Party will hope to change between now and the election.

It is surprising to see the Shadow Chancellor only scoring 39%, given the prominence of Labour's spending plans and the central role she is playing in policy-making. Notably, a third of all voters said they were 'not at all familiar' with Rachel Reeves. Given how important it will be for Labour to convince the public to trust them on tax and spending these figures will need to shift if the Party wants to win.

Another point to note is the relative familiarity with Angela Rayner. There have been suggestions that Starmer's advisors have tried to muzzle the Deputy Leader. But with our poll suggesting she is one of Labour's better-known figures could it be time to make more use of her authenticity to the Party's advantage?

The relatively low levels of knowledge of Shadow Ministers like Lisa Nandy, Wes Streeting and Bridget Phillipson are perhaps unsurprising; as we discuss later in this document, Labour has not yet set out very detailed proposals for devolution, health and social care, and education. But turning them into familiar, trusted, figures will be vital as Labour seals the deal before the general election.

Percentage who said they would most like to have a coffee with the following party leaders:

	All	Men	Women	25-34yo	65+yo
Keir Starmer	38%	37%	39%	41%	25%
Rishi Sunak	37%	37%	37%	35%	51%
Ed Davey	13%	14%	13%	12%	13%
Humza Yousaf	12%	13%	11%	12%	10%

Starmer scores relatively well on whether voters would want to have a coffee with each of the party leaders, out-doing Sunak by just a single point. With many members of the public being fairly uninterested in politics it is quite heartening to see that nearly two-in-five voters would share a trip to Starbucks with the Leader of the Opposition.

But there are big differences on this measure between the age groups. It's not surprising that a more left-wing leader appeals to younger people. But it is interesting that this persists right up to the 55–64 age bracket, which favours coffee with Starmer over Sunak by a chunky 41% to 27%.

What will be troubling for Labour is that only a quarter of pensioners want to have a coffee with its Leader, compared to more than half with the PM. This suggests that there is work to be done to make sure this cohort, which typically turns out to vote in good numbers, learns to trust Starmer.

Overall, our polling suggests that Labour may not have yet sealed the deal with the electorate, not because its key players are disliked, but they are just not very well-known. That needs to change over the next few months. Concentrating all the attention on the Leader has been an understandable strategy up to now, but if Labour wants to win big it will need to do more to ensure that the public knows, trusts and likes its frontbench team.

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LABOUR'S POLICY PROCESS



What we know so far on Labour policy-making



SIMON DARBY
Director,
Public Affairs

The "Starmer project" has been a three-year mission to repair Labour's image in voter's minds – focused on stability, patriotism, robust defence and upholding the rule of law.

Criticised in some quarters for lacking vision – and, as we've said, for lacking recognition and familiarity – the Labour leadership has taken steps in recent months to provide clarity and excitement about what the Party will deliver in Government.

A clearer idea of individual policies that will make up the 2024 election manifesto has emerged through the leaked 86-page National Policy Forum (NPF) handbook. This will be debated and agreed by NPF members in meetings in June and July, followed by crunch decisions to be made on the floor of this year's party conference in Liverpool. The final set of proposals will then be agreed in a "Clause V" meeting made up of key members of the Shadow Cabinet, party insiders and Trade Union representatives.

Shadow Ministers and policy staff are always the most dominant voices in the room and the process is likely to follow the Leader of the Opposition's will.

There may be dissent to come from Trade Union reps and delegates, but they're all fairly preoccupied with industrial action and disputes, so I expect the NPF process and Annual Conference to be a rubberstamping process from the leadership's perspective. Last year's Conference was very much in this vein, with the largest corporate sponsorship seen for many years and less visible disagreement from the Party faithful about the leadership's direction.

Labour is conscious that more of a "retail" offer will be needed for voters, as seen by Starmer calling for ambitious reforms to allow building on the greenbelt. One thing that is clear is that the rest of this year is critical for organisations to understand where Labour is at on policy and how they can further engage.

The NPF provides the most detail yet but there is still a long way to go before Labour confirms its manifesto and full programme for Government.

The five missions



DAN BAYNES

**Account
Director,
Public Affairs**

On 23rd February 2023, Keir Starmer spoke in Manchester to outline Labour's approach to deliver a "mission-driven" government which would seek to end "sticking plaster politics."

Each mission includes a "route map" with a measurable goal and policy plan to guide a future Labour Government. Labour has faced criticism that the missions lack the policy detail needed for voters to put their trust in Labour whilst Starmer has been challenged that the missions are incompatible with the more left-wing pledges he made in the Labour leadership contest.

But, as Labour outlines the details within each mission, the Party will be hoping they will help shape the conversation over the next 18 months in advance of the next general election, driving media coverage and conversations on the doorstep.



1 Secure the highest sustained growth in the G7...

"...with good jobs and productivity growth in every part of the country making everyone, not just a few, better off."

The first of Starmer's five pledges is to "secure the highest sustained growth in the G7", promising to create good jobs and stronger productivity in every region of the UK. He emphasised the word "sustained", insisting that Labour-led growth would drive up living standards in the longer term and be driven from the grassroots in communities across the country. The pledge shows the ambition of Starmer, and Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves, as they seek to prove Labour's economic competencies and business acumen.

In a bid to broaden Labour's appeal to voters, Starmer said that his approach to the economy would be neither "state control" nor "pure free markets", insisting that he is "not concerned" about whether investment originates from the private or public sector.

Indeed, he maintained that there would be a role for the private sector under his "mission-driven" Labour Government, though guaranteed that communities would retain "robust power" to control private sector growth through a new 'take back control' bill.

Starmer has faced criticism that his economic plan is reticent about detail and many doubt the extent to which a Labour Government could achieve the highest growth in the G7 without re-joining the EU Single Market and Customs Union.

Questions over the Party's fiscal policy remain too. While Starmer has previously said that the UK's tax burden is too high for working people, it is not yet clear how he will make the tax system fairer or if the Party will introduce a wealth tax.

2 Make Britain a clean energy superpower...

"...to create jobs, cut bills and boost energy security with zero-carbon electricity by 2030, accelerating to net zero."

Mission 2 is, arguably, Labour's only truly measurable pledge out of the five so far, with a commitment to reach zero-carbon electricity by 2030. It is, in Starmer's own words, a 'sharp intake of breath' pledge, and admits people in the industry are sceptical that it can be achieved, even with a vastly more attractive policy and investment landscape. With a General Election not expected to be held until October 2024, Starmer has, in effect, given himself just five years to achieve this goal.

While the UK has already exceeded 50% renewable power, making up the remaining shortfall will require not just a huge rollout

of new generation, but also major new grid infrastructure, not to mention a supply chain which can deal with a sharp increase in demand, and a skilled workforce which can deliver the scale of new projects.

Nonetheless, no one can doubt the ambition of what he and the Labour Party want to achieve and it is significant that this will be a key plank of the forthcoming manifesto. Starmer's ambitions are certainly lofty, and the barriers to achieving his targets in this area are not insignificant, but this is a serious message of intent which could help rebuild the sector's confidence.

3 Build an NHS fit for the future...

"...by reforming health and care services to speed up treatment, harnessing life sciences and technology to reduce preventable illness, and cutting health inequalities."

Starmer announced that the Party would focus on prevention and capacity in its NHS mission, a Labour government would move beyond quick fixes for the NHS, to a new vision.

The Party plans for expanded numbers of doctors and nurses and wants to explore opportunities for innovation in health care. On prevention, Starmer has said, 'you can't make healthier lives without people changing their habits,' but to date has provided little detail on Labour's proposed approach.

4 Make Britain's streets safe...

"...by reforming the police and justice system, to prevent crime, tackle violence against women, and stop criminals getting away without punishment."

Echoing Labour's last election winner Tony Blair, Starmer claimed that Labour would be "tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime".

Quoting Tony Blair will do little to dispel criticism that he has moved to the right and abandoned the pledges made during his leadership campaign, however Starmer will hope that crime is another area where he can tap into widespread public dissatisfaction. As police forces across the country continue to grapple with a series of high-profile scandals and failures, particularly

around how the police protect women, Starmer's commitment to tackle violence against women and ensure crimes do not go unpunished seems perfectly targeted to focus on an area of broad concern amongst the public.

It furthers his commitment at the top of his speech to "fix the fundamentals" and tackle the basic issues that affect people's everyday lives, with Starmer able to leverage his personal experience in this area as a former Director of Public Prosecutions.

5 Break down the barriers to opportunity at every stage...

"...for every child, by reforming the childcare and education systems, raising standards everywhere, and preparing young people for work and life".

Starmer's education pledges revolve around a central aim, to "break down barriers to opportunity." This will be achieved primarily through "reforming childcare, reforming education, [and] raising standards everywhere." Overall, the Labour leader envisages a system which will "[prepare] young people for work and for life."

Labour's most tangible pledges have been in the Early Years and Childcare space, not just for removing barriers for children but

in enabling economic growth and allowing parents to re-enter the workforce.

Shadow Secretary of State for Education Bridget Phillipson has previously pledged to offer comprehensive support from the end of parental leave through all primary school years, and recently returned from a trip to Australia where she studied how Anthony Albanese's Labour Party pledge to make childcare more affordable may have helped swing his election victory last year.

What will Labour's approach mean for education policy



TIFFANY BECK

Senior
Account
Director,
Education

Labour's approach on education will be critical for achieving two of the missions set out by Starmer on achieving growth and breaking down barriers. The shadow education team has been focused resolutely on putting childcare and skills reform at the centre of its proposals – two significant strains the Party has identified as holding back the UK economy.

Labour is seeking to deliver a landmark shift in skills provision, connecting industry and devolved administrations much closer into the process to ensure provision can match regional requirements and prepare the workforce for the changing face of the jobs market in the 21st century.

They are also committed to delivering on their pledge to end the VAT exemption for independent schools, with promises to take the funds they say will be recouped and directing them towards areas such as childcare, careers advisors and professional development opportunities.

The Party has an interesting balancing task in how it approaches the landmark reforms made by Conservative-led governments since 2010, with elements of existing academies, assessment and Ofsted policies expected to be maintained by Labour as they seek to provide the sector with much needed stability whilst still making their mark.

For instance, while Phillipson appears lukewarm on the academies system – which was established, of course, by Lord Adonis when a Schools Minister in 2003 during the second Blair Government – the Party has to date not suggested changing it, and indeed the Shadow Schools Minister, Stephen Morgan MP, is known to be a keen supporter of academies where they perform well. Likewise, the Party's focus on childcare and support for the early years could be seen as a nod to New Labour's Sure Start programme.

However, they remain aware of demands to be bolder and more radical on the school system and have looked to a number of advisers including the Government's former Covid catch-up tsar Sir Kevan Collins and Lord David Blunkett, former Education Secretary under Tony Blair, to help provide a vision for the future of the education system.

For reference, PLMR provided an overview of Labour's public stances on education [issues late in 2022](#).

"40% of young people leave compulsory education without essential qualifications... That is why Labour will launch the most ambitious school improvement plan ever"

Labour's clean energy ambitions



**PATRICK
COUSENS**

**Director,
Energy and
Sustainability**

Amid high energy prices, geopolitical instability and international climate concern, Labour has made energy reform a key policy priority.

One of Labour's five missions is to 'make Britain a clean energy superpower' and the Party has set an ambitious target to deliver zero-carbon power by 2030, five years ahead of the existing government timeline. It will be an enormous challenge to deliver this pledge by the end of the decade, as significant upgrades to the grid network are required. However, for Shadow Climate Secretary, Ed Miliband, "the prize is massive": improved energy security, reduced carbon emissions, lower energy bills, and the creation of jobs and new investment which will address regional imbalances in wealth.

Labour will look to deliver clean electricity as part of the Green Prosperity Plan, outlined at the PLMR-sponsored Labour Business Conference in December 2022. Presented as a UK version of the US Inflation Reduction Act, Labour wants to establish a narrative that the Conservatives are holding back the net zero transition and causing the UK to fall behind in the race for green economic opportunities.

However, while the Green Prosperity Plan will be a key part of any future manifesto, the Party's pledge to invest £28bn a year into the green economy has now been revised to reflect how Labour's destiny is tied to the current economic landscape.

Despite scaling back their commitment on funding, the Party has promised to be more

radical by removing barriers for potential investors and accelerate the planning system. Through this action, they hope to increase renewable capacity – doubling onshore wind, tripling solar and quadrupling offshore wind – and deliver new nuclear power. It will also support emerging technologies such as floating offshore wind, carbon capture and storage (CCS), tidal power and hydrogen. The woman hoping to enter No. 11 next year, Rachel Reeves, has often spoken about she wants to be 'Britain's first green chancellor'. However, the focus on environmental spending has frustrated some Shadow Cabinet ministers who have called for funding to be extended to other areas such as housing and transport.

The creation of an £8bn National Wealth Fund is another proposed mechanism which will invest in net zero industries (clean steel, green hydrogen and CCS), battery gigafactories, offshore wind clusters and ports. Alongside new funding, Labour also intends to reform the energy market through the creation of GB Energy, a state-owned clean energy investment vehicle which will help unblock riskier, next generation technologies, such as tidal, by providing up-front capital and access to government debt rates.

Clear blue water now separates Labour and the Conservatives on the future of oil and gas, as Starmer has committed to stopping licenses for fresh exploration. The Party insists new oil and gas would not only be disastrous for the UK's climate commitments but would also threaten investment in green technologies such as battery storage.

Building an NHS Fit for the Future



**ROGER
GREER**

**Associate
Director, PLMR
Healthcomms**

High amongst Starmer's 5 Missions for a Better Britain was the pledge to build an NHS fit for the future – highlighting the importance of the NHS to the Labour Party, and to the public.

The Labour Party is looking to deliver some long-term solutions to resolve some of the crises it is currently facing: tackling the backlog; supporting the workforce; and shaping the system to meet the needs of communities.

Their mission to build an NHS "fit for the future" is shaped around shifting services away from acute settings and into communities; increasing the focus on prevention; and embracing technology and innovation to support the move from an 'analogue' to a 'digital' NHS.

In Wes Streeting, Labour has a young, articulate and pragmatic Shadow Health Secretary. Tipped to be the next leader of the Labour Party, Streeting's belief that innovation and technology are gamechangers for improving the health service shows a willingness to work alongside industry to ensure the success of the NHS for the future, a far cry from recent Labour Party stances on working with business.

In a recent speech Streeting noted that Labour could not pour resources into the NHS without improving efficiencies within its services. That is much easier said than done for a system which faces top-down reform almost once every decade.

The NHS is the closest thing which England has to a religion. It will take more than a prayer to fix some of the issues currently faced by the NHS; but the Labour Party's focus on resolving some of the long-term challenges, alongside business and industry, will be welcome for the sector. Labour's hope that it will also be attractive to voters, many of whom are feeling the impact of its recent challenges acutely.

The IPPR's commission on health and prosperity found that lost earnings due to long-term sickness cost the UK economy £43bn in 2023, equivalent to 2% of GDP.

Labour's approach to tech



**SARA
GHAFFARI**

**Director, PR
and Corporate
Communications**

At the core of Labour's approach to tech policy is the belief that innovation and investment in a well-regulated technology sector can fuel growth, and thereby support Keir Starmer's pledge to make Britain the fastest growing country in the G7.

Labour has criticised the Government's "limiting approach" to the sector, arguing that they will instead take an approach to tech regulation which enables good practice and innovation.

This ambition has led to bold pledges, with a commitment to target spending 3% of GDP on R&D. They're also committed to improving the rollout of 5G, which they argue has been excessively slow under the Conservatives. Arguing that broadband is no longer a luxury, but the "newest utility", they have supported measures including a social tariff for low-income families. Commenting on the plans, Lucy Powell, Labour's Shadow Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, said "Labour will ensure accessing and connecting to digital infrastructure powers growth across our economy".

Labour has set a target to spend 3% of GDP on R&D in Government.

However, while welcoming the potential for technology to revolutionise the British economy, the Party has expressed wariness around tech giants. Powell has noted that Labour planned to "harness the digital age for the many, not the few".

At the same time, the Labour Party has been outspoken on the big issue in tech regulation today – the passage of the long-awaited Online Safety Bill – speaking in favour of more robust measures to protect people online. In particular, they committed to bringing forward legislation to tackle 'legal but harmful' material, after the Government removed the measure from the Online Safety Bill.

Powell has made it clear that the Party is prepared to bring forward stronger legislation in Government if they feel the Conservatives have not gone far enough.

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WHO'S WHO IN LABOUR?



The key players – Shadow Cabinet

The composition of Starmer's Shadow Cabinet over the past three years has mirrored his own political journey. Starting with a group of more leftist figures seen as favourable to the previous leadership, his team is now made up of more experienced and centrist politicians.

Members of the Shadow Cabinet are expected to work hard in setting the agenda, delivering key messages on the airwaves and supporting candidates in key seats. But with the leadership taking a cautious approach based around a few key messages and the promotion of an aura of economic credibility, there has been limited scope for individual frontbenchers to make their mark.

That may explain the findings of the polling conducted for PLMR, which showed limited name recognition for many members of the Shadow Cabinet. That will have to change as the election draws closer. Over the next few months we can expect the key figures listed here to become much better known as Labour tries to seal the deal with the electorate.



Keir Starmer

(60) | MP for Holborn and St Pancras | Leader of the Opposition

From his time as Director of Public Prosecutions he gained an understanding of the inner workings of government at the highest level. Critics have said that Starmer has been too cautious and lacks the fundamental charisma to achieve the scale of the task ahead of him but he has shown so far that he has the willingness (and ruthlessness) to change Labour into an election-winning party once again.



Angela Rayner

(43) | MP for Ashton-Under-Lyne | Deputy Leader, Shadow Minister for the Cabinet Office and Shadow Secretary of State for the Future of Work

Rayner and Starmer's disagreements on policy and style have been well aired but she enjoys a personal mandate of her own from party members and will remain an important part of a Labour Government.



Rachel Reeves

(44) | MP for Leeds West | Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer

Enjoys a very strong relationship with Starmer and a key power broker when it comes to policy. No announcements are made unless they have been signed off by the Shadow Treasury team, with a clear directive of 'no unfunded policy pledges'. The former Bank of England economist is also well respected by the business community.



Pat McFadden

(58) | MP for Wolverhampton South East | Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury

Reeves' second-in-command also holds an incredibly important role in maintaining Labour's ambition of economic credibility, he is cited as being the one who tells the Shadow Cabinet "no" to outlandish spending. He is a New Labour veteran, a key part of Blair's Downing Street and a Minister in Brown's Government – his experience will be vital for Starmer and others in shaping their approach to the operations of government.



Ed Miliband

(53) | MP for Doncaster North | Shadow Secretary of State for Climate Change and Net Zero

The former Labour Leader has had his critics across senior circles in the Party but retains a key role in idea generation for Starmer. Labour's most bold ambitions relate to investment into green industries and the creation of GB Energy – both of which will fall under his remit.



Bridget Phillipson

(39) | MP for Houghton and Sunderland South | Shadow Secretary of State for Education

Seen as a safe pair of hands and problem solver within Labour's moderate ranks, she has made strides in putting Labour's childcare offer on the map.



Wes Streeting

(40) | MP for Ilford North | Shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

The frontbench's most articulate communicator and potentially a future candidate for Leader himself. He has been willing to take on parts of the Labour establishment in calling for wider reform of the NHS.

Key players behind the scenes

While Starmer's frontbench picks have clearly helped set the tone, his backroom operators have also been incredibly influential. They have gone to great lengths to reform the Labour Party, both internally and externally. The Party is unrecognisable from three years ago, in the rooting out of antisemitism, selection of candidates, relationship with businesses and the professional approach to messaging and policy announcements.

- **Deborah Mattinson**
(Director of Strategy)
Responsible for developing Labour's narrative and message; she oversees focus groups and voter analysis.
- **Morgan McSweeney**
(Campaign Director)
Responsible for running Labour's election campaigns.
- **Matthew Doyle**
(Director of Communications)
Responsible for delivering Labour's media strategy; he directs the press office and oversees all communications.
- **Paul Ovenden**
(Director of Attack and Rebuttal)
Responsible for briefing against Labour's opponents and deflecting their own claims.
- **Stuart Ingham**
(Director of Policy)
Responsible for the Party's policy platform; he also provides Keir Starmer with advice and support.
- **Jill Cuthbertson**
(Director of the Opposition Leader's Office)
A key gatekeeper who leads day-to-day running of Starmer's office.
- **Ravinder Athwal**
(Manifesto Lead)
Responsible for developing Labour's manifesto for the next general election.
- **Katie Martin**
(Chief of Staff to the Shadow Chancellor)
Plays an important role in the development of Labour's economic policy.

Wider influences on the Labour Party

Other organisations, such as the National Executive Committee (NEC), Trade Unions and socialist societies, remain influential, but the power over the Labour Party flows from Keir Starmer, his office, and the Party hierarchy which now works hand in glove.

A knowledge of how these wider influencers in the "Labour Movement" impact on the way Labour runs is still well worth knowing for organisations and on occasion, engagement with these bodies directly can benefit your success in creating relationships with the Labour Party.

- **The National Executive Committee**
Provides the strategic direction for the Party as a whole, is comprised of representatives from the Shadow Cabinet, MPs, councillors, trade unions, Socialist Societies, Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs).
- **Trade Unions**
The Labour Party was formed out of the trade union movement, Labour Unions is the umbrella organisation that coordinates the activities of the 11 trade unions who affiliate to the Labour Party.
- **Constituency Labour Party (CLP)**
CLPs are the local party based on constituencies. They choose members to represent them at the Annual Conference and select parliamentary candidates for elections.
- **Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP)**
The caucus of Labour MPs in Parliament, currently Chaired by John Cryer MP.

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LABOUR'S ELECTORAL PROSPECTS



The current political context



LEON EMIRALI

**Senior
Political
Counsel**

After years in the wilderness, Labour is desperate to return to power. The leadership knows that good policies matter little if you can't implement them. They believe a victory can only be achieved if the Party rebuilds trust with voters who have rejected them, particularly in previously safe constituencies in the North and the Midlands.

To achieve this, the Party has sought to distance itself from former leader Jeremy Corbyn, who remains unpopular with a wide section of the electorate and now sits as an independent. Much of the first phase of Keir Starmer's stewardship focused on internal party affairs, positioning the Party as a moderate option who voters can visualise in power, taking a leaf out of Tony Blair's New Labour playbook.

Labour also, rightly, believes it must rebuild trust around economic management, after the Party's reputation suffered in the aftermath of the 2007–08 Global Financial Crisis. The leadership thinks taxpayers will only vote for Labour if they feel confident their money is in safe hands. It is this economic competency that shapes Labour's offer to the electorate.

But all of this has meant a safety-first approach which, as our polling shows, has so far left voters cold. Being safe and competent could be enough to take Labour to power, but to secure its victory we are going to have to see much more vision and excitement from the leadership team.

1974: Last time Labour won a General Election not under the leadership of Tony Blair.

Impact of the 2023 local elections



GAVIN DEVINE
Advisor,
PLMR Board

Labour has been way ahead of the Conservatives in the polls since the chaotic Truss administration in the Autumn of 2022. But the first real test of voters' intentions came in the May 2023 local elections. What do the results tell us about the standing of the parties?

It's important to say right off the bat that elections were only held in some parts of the country. For example, London and Scotland were missed out. This matters because both of these will be crucial battlegrounds when it comes to the general election.

It's also important to note that the seats up for grabs this time were last contested 4 years ago, and at that point the results were really bad for the Conservatives. Which made it all the more noticeable when the Party tried to manage expectations in the run up to the vote this time by saying that it risked losing up to 1,000 seats.

The Conservatives clearly hoped that they would lose 700 or so seats and could therefore claim that they had done better than expected. The fact that they lost more than 1,000 councillors made this a truly disastrous set of results.

Labour won lots of seats and became the biggest party in local government. It also took control of councils in areas like Kent and Wiltshire and in parts of the Red Wall (such as Middlesbrough). It will need to do well in places like these to win the General Election.

But whilst Labour did well it did not do well enough. Its share of the vote has been estimated at only 35%, a mere nine points ahead of the Tories when it is widely accepted that it will need to be further in front to form a majority after the next election. On what might have been a day of triumph it was reduced to having to remind pundits not to read too much into local election results.

The results also rekindled speculation about Labour potentially needing to work with other parties to form the next government. That's because the real winners were the Liberal Democrats, who won a large number of new seats and saw their vote share climb to 20%. In the south and south west the Party looks set to be the challenger to the Conservatives. Starmer has duly refused to rule out an arrangement with the Lib Dems after the next election.

Local elections are often fought on local issues, and they are not the greatest guide to what will happen in a national poll. But these results confirm that Labour is not doing quite as well as they might be – and the Conservatives are in real trouble.

	Seats	Gains/losses
Labour	2,675	+537
Conservative	2,296	-1,063
Lib Dems	1,628	+407
Independent	865	-89
Greens	481	+241

The impact of Starmer's rise on the Conservatives

What does Labour's persistently high polling mean for the Conservative Party? Specifically, how concerned is the average Tory MP about Labour and what it means for their prospects at the next Election? Conservative MPs agree about very little these days, not least what their own party stands for. So there is little consensus about how to respond to Labour being a serious electoral contender, let alone how to handle its policy ideas.

In CCHQ there is growing confidence that Starmer is beatable despite the chaos of Johnson and Truss, with Rishi Sunak's personal polling moving upwards. The Labour Party might enjoy a high level of support but the gaps are narrowing and neither Starmer or the Labour Party has yet sealed the deal with the electorate. There is a growing sense that Starmer makes mistakes, changes his mind and does not engender a feelgood factor amongst voters. If the Tories could unite behind Sunak there might be a route to victory but MPs desperate to hang onto their seats are not an easy bunch to unite. And it's not clear that Conservative MPs are ready to do what it would take to win. There are fundamental disagreements about the best way to beat Starmer: is it a Truss vision of low taxes and low regulations coupled with red meat on immigration, or a more moderate approach based on sound finances?

Is a strong immovable line on Brexit or more joint working with the EU? Should the focus be on shoring up the Red Wall or protecting the core vote in southern England, or could they do both?

Some Conservative MPs still believe a general election is winnable but others are not taking the risk and have already given up and said they won't be standing again (and keep an eye out for more to come). Some of those remaining will clearly have half an eye on the leadership contest that would follow if Sunak loses the General Election when they will feel that their vision of the Conservative Party can finally emerge. A few still hang onto Boris Johnson's magic thinking that the election is still winnable if only Johnson plays a key role.

In 2017 and 2019 Jeremy Corbyn was a valuable asset for the Tories. Not only is Corbyn gone but each day highlights that the Government can't answer the concerns of restless voters. Meanwhile, Sir Keir has emerged as a plausible albeit unexciting Prime Minister in waiting, at a time when voters have probably had too much excitement over recent years and the Conservatives are losing ground dithering over their options. MPs are fractious and tired. It may take two elections in quick succession to get there, but as it stands Starmer looks on track to condemn the Tories to a long period in opposition.



**RT. HON.
ANNE MILTON**
**PLMR Advisor,
Former
Conservative
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Chief Whip,
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Minister**

West Midlands battleground



WILL SAVAGE
Director, PLMR
Birmingham
and PLMR
Advent

The West Midlands provided a bruising set of results in the 2019 election with former Labour strongholds such as West Bromwich and Wolverhampton turning blue as part of the breakdown of the "red wall".

15 seats won in the West Midlands in the 2019 General Election

The region provided a mixed set of results in the 2023 set of local elections, with Labour regaining control of Stoke-On-Trent City Council - seen as a key indicator of progress - whereas the Party lost a seat in Coventry. There have also been questions internally about the future of Birmingham City Council's leadership which may hamper Labour in the UK's second city.

Labour may also be concerned about the relative popularity of Rishi Sunak in the region. In our polling, 45% of people in the West Midlands and 43% in the East Midlands would like to have a coffee with the PM, easily beating the number who want to meet Keir Starmer (37% and 39% respectively).

Nevertheless, the West Midlands will be a key focus for Labour in 2024 and the Party will hope the likes of the Stoke seats and Newcastle-Under-Lyme will return Labour MPs to help form a potential majority. The focus on cost of living, revitalising high streets and tackling crime will form a key part of the Party's messages to voters in the region.

Next May will also see the next election of the West Midlands Mayor, so far held by the Conservative Andy Street, another key landmark to survey progress being made in the region. Labour have selected Richard Parker as their candidate, a former lead on housing and communities at PwC, two issues sure to be a key part of the campaign.

33.9% – Labour's Vote Share in the West Midlands in the 2019 General Election

Will the East of England see Labour gains?



ALI STRAKER
Director,
PLMR Genesis

At first glance, the East of England is not likely to be one of the key battlegrounds in the next General Election. Only a handful of Labour's top hundred target seats are located here. But if Labour is going to win a majority the East will have a vital role to play.

5 seats won in the East of England in the 2019 General Election

In Tony Blair's landslide win in 1997 this region returned more than 20 Labour MPs. Constituencies like Great Yarmouth and North West Norfolk turned red. Now the region is a sea of blue, with Labour clinging on only in pockets like Cambridge, Norwich South and Bedford. But that doesn't mean the Party will be giving up here.

Although the big rural seats of Norfolk, Suffolk and North Essex might be beyond Labour's reach, it will have higher hopes in local cities, towns and suburbs. Here, Labour's emphasis on industrial policy and its big commitments to sustainability will be well-received in a region where the knowledge economy, green growth

and advanced manufacturing are increasingly important.

There are signs too that Keir Starmer may be proving popular with local residents. 39% of people in the region told our survey they'd like to have a coffee with him, slightly above his national average figure. That only puts him roughly on a par with Rishi Sunak (40%), but given Labour's struggles to cut through in the East of England, this does give a glimmer of hope.

If Labour does well in the region it brings places like Norwich North, Ipswich and Colchester into play. For different reasons, Peterborough looks vulnerable too, and Iain Duncan Smith's constituency of Chingford and Woodford Green appears certain to turn Red. If things go well Labour could gain up to 10 seats, forming a key part of an overall majority.

So on election day I'd recommend not just watching out for what's happening in the Red Wall or the Blue Wall. Look East too for a yardstick of whether Labour is going to win big.

24.4% – Labour's Vote Share in the East of England in the 2019 General Election

Scotland: The key to a Labour win

For most of the 20th Century and for more than a decade after the millennium, Labour was by far the most dominant party in Scotland. As recently as the 2010 General Election it won 41 seats. But after the independence referendum it experienced a meltdown, winning only one seat in 2015 and 2019.

However, the tribulations of the SNP over the past few months mean that Labour is now on the up. Our polling shows that Keir Starmer is better known in Scotland than on average across the country, with 82% familiarity. Other leading lights, including Angela Rayner, Rachel Reeves and Lisa Nandy, are better known north of the border than in the UK as a whole. And our survey also saw Starmer comfortably beating Sunak in the 'who would you like to have a coffee with' stakes (33% to 22%), and closing in on the Scottish First Minister (36%).

In addition, Scottish Labour has a newish leader, Anas Sarwar, who is viewed as a good performer who has positioned the Party to deliver its biggest crop of Scottish MPs for a while.

The return of former Cabinet Minister Douglas Alexander to stand in East Lothian reflects this newfound confidence. How well the Party will do is the question.

Sarwar enjoys a close and trusted relationship with Keir Starmer and the Party's central campaign machine, both men are to undertake a series of "listening tours" across Scotland. A tailored approach is being developed to target former Labour voters who may be re-considering the SNP based on recent controversies the Scottish government has faced. Greater Glasgow, the central belt and the Western Isles will all be key targets.

What we know for sure is that, without a strong performance in Scotland, Labour will not form a majority government in Westminster. A former Scottish Secretary estimated privately recently that Labour could win 15–20 seats north of the border. If that's true Keir Starmer will be the next PM.



EMMA DIVERS
Senior Account
Director,
Scotland

29% Labour's Westminster polling in Scotland – 21st May – Ipsos

PLMR
INSIGHTS

HOW TO ENGAGE



PLMR recommendations

What's the best way to engage with the Labour Party?

First, talk to the right people. Labour policy-making can seem to be limited to a tight inner circle around the Leader and the Shadow Chancellor. But there are key formal and informal advisors who may be easier to reach. And as we've said, as more meat is put on the bones of Labour's approach to government a wider group of decision-makers and influencers will emerge.

Second, make sure your message resonates with the Party's priorities. Labour is keen to hear about investments and job creation outside the South East. It wants to help businesses buy, make and sell more in Britain. Green growth is important. But new issues will come forward over time, giving new themes for you to discuss.

All of this can be hard to navigate. Which is where our specialists at PLMR come in. Our expertise is in keeping on top of who is in and out, what relationships are like at the heart of the Party, and how policies are being drawn up.

With consultants who have worked at the heart of Government and Parliament, managed the profile of Ministers and shadow Ministers, served as councillors, and stood as Labour candidates, PLMR has the knowledge and understanding of the Party you need to build lasting relationships and turn your ideas and recommendations into policy.



About PLMR

PLMR is one of the leading specialist public affairs agencies in the UK.

We were PProvoke Media's EMEA Public Affairs Agency of the Year 2022 and were shortlisted again in 2023, and were announced to be one of the top 10 public affairs agencies in the 2023 PR Week league tables. Our Head of Public Affairs, Simon Darby, was named Public Affairs Consultant of the Year at the 2022 PRCA Public Affairs Awards; our advisor, Gavin Devine, was recognised for his Outstanding Contribution to public affairs at the same event in 2021.

Our team also contains Labour's Parliamentary candidate for Ipswich, Jack Abbott, as well as several other consultants who have served as councillors, special advisors, researchers and party officials for all of the major parties.

Our public affairs offer is part of a 100-strong integrated communications team, also providing media relations, reputation management and crisis communications, social and digital marketing and comms services.

PLMR has offices in Westminster, the West Midlands, East of England, and Scotland, giving a unique regional perspective and on-the-ground reach.

Please email our Founder and CEO, Kevin Craig on kevin.craig@plmr.co.uk to find out how we can help you deliver real results from engaging with the Labour Party and stakeholders from across the political spectrum.

PLMR
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