The People's Priorities

What must the Government deliver in 2023?

Iain Mansfield

Policy Exchange

The People's Priorities

What must the Government deliver in 2023?

Iain Mansfield

About the Author

Iain Mansfield is Director of Research and Head of Education and Science at Policy Exchange. He is a former Special Adviser to three Education Ministers, including Education Secretary Gavin Williamson and Universities Ministers Jo Johnson and Michelle Donelan. Prior to that he has held a variety of senior positions in the private and public sector, including as a Senior Civil Servant at the Department for Education, as Director of UK Trade and Investment, The Philippines in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and as Head of Public Sector at the Association of Chartered and Certified Accountants. He has been a university governor and a Director of a British Chamber of Commerce.

Acknowledgements

The poll was conducted by PeoplePolling for Policy Exchange. PeoplePolling is a member of the British Polling Council (BPC) and abides by its rules.

The author would also like to thank Toby Hirst, intern at Policy Exchange, for his contribution to this report. The final report and conclusions therein remain the responsibility of the author.

Contents

Introduction

If a week is a long time in politics, a year is an eternity. On 1 January 2022, Boris Johnson was Prime Minister, there was no war in Europe, and Britain was bracing itself for Omicron, waiting to see whether this new wave would prove as devastating as the ones before. Many families had had their Christmas plans disrupted due to the need to isolate, but the Government had taken the bold – and, with hindsight, entirely correct – decision to trust the emerging data on vaccination and severity, and not order a further lockdown or school closures.

On Politico's poll of polls, Labour were just six percentage points ahead, having recently taken the lead after over two years' of Tory dominance[1]. Partygate had broken, but the worst revelations were yet to come. Inflation was 5.5%[2] and the Bank of England interest rate had recently been raised from 0.1% to 0.25%,[3] and it was just half a year since The Economist had written an editorial gently chiding the then Chancellor for worrying about it – 'he should relax', they said.[4]

Exclusive end of year for Policy Exchange reveals the public's priorities for the Government in 2023.

This report presents the issues the public think are top priority for the Government – and, conversely, which are low priority, or that they oppose. We consider how these vary across different demographic groups and also look at areas where the public would be prepared to make savings in public spending. Finally, we ask what elements, if any, of the Government's record and achievements have cut through – and where people consider it needs to deliver to have a chance of winning the next election.

A poll, any poll, can only ever be a snapshot: an attempt to capture the mood or vibe of a nation at one specific moment in time. Its predictive power of what issues will dominate at the next election is limited. Things which once seemed all-important, such as COVID, can fade from relevance and other topics – crime, perhaps, or education – can shoot to new salience after a crime wage, or a cut to school budgets. Nevertheless, polling of this sort can be useful in providing insight into what issues, right now, voters are worried about and where they believe the Government should take action.

1. https://www.politico.eu/europe-poll-of-polls/united-kingdom/
2. https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/consumer-priceinflationukjanuary2022
3. https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/boeapps/database/Bank-Rate.asp
4. https://www.economist.com/brit-ain/2021/06/03/rishi-sunak-is-worried-about-rising-interest-rates-he-should-relax

Dominant Issues

Overwhelmingly, across all questions, two issues dominated: the cost of living, and the NHS. A little way behind this, but in clear third place, was immigration and small boats. These issues were consistently sighted as priorities and were the only three issues to score over 25% on the question of what would give the Government the best chance of winning the next general election – with no other issue polling above 10%.

'Cost of Living' was the most common answer to the free text question, '*In as few words as possible, what do you believe is the BIGGEST problem in Britain the government should focus on in 2023?*' cited by 14% of those who answered this question, almost four times as high as the next highest response, which was Immigration. Many other responses also referred to the cost of living ('cost of living crisis', 'inflation', which together alone add another 6%) and there was a further cluster of responses referring explicitly to energy prices ('energy crisis', 'energy costs', energy prices', 'fuel costs') which collectively added almost another 7%.

Bring down inflation to stop the price of household goods rising was also the most popular result – selected by 26% of people – when asked for the single issue most important for the Government to prioritise in 2023. This was followed by *Reduce NHS Waiting Lists* and *Build more self-sufficient energy infrastructure, such as wind, solar and nuclear*, both on 15%, and *Reduce immigration by stopping the small boats crossing the Channel* and *Reduce people's taxes to help with the cost of living* (both on 12%). No other answer polled higher than 3%.

On the list below, what is the one issue that is most important for the government to prioritise in 2023?
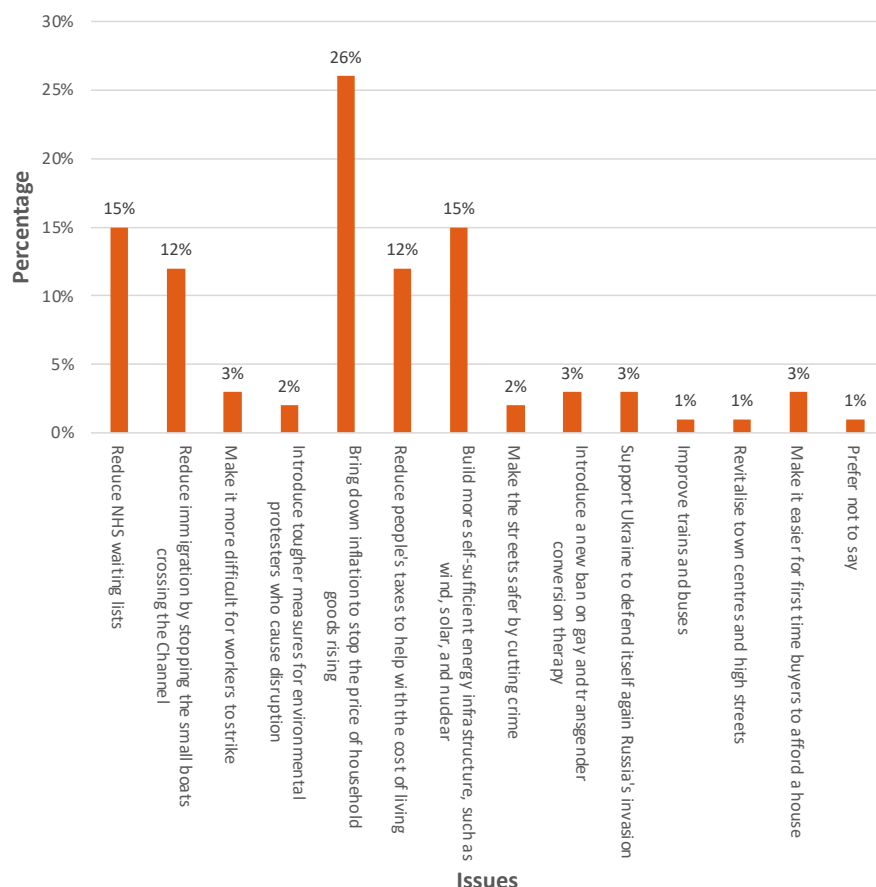

Although the cost of living dominates in these questions, when asked what people think will give the Government the best chance of winning the next election, *Improving the National Health Service* comes top, at 44%[5], followed by *Reducing Inflation/cost of living* (29%) and *Reducing immigration/the small boats* (26%), with no other option polling above 10%.

Similarly, when the public were asked to select up to three issues for the Government to prioritise (rather than a single issue, as above), *Bring down inflation to stop the price of household goods* and *Reduce NHS Waiting Lists* were equal top at 48% each, followed by *Build more self-sufficient energy infrastructure, such as wind, solar and nuclear* (38%), *Reduce immigration by stopping the small boats crossing the Channel* (28%) and *Reduce people's taxes to help with the cost of living* (26%). The order varies slightly, but the top three issues are clear: firstly cost of living and inflation (including building more energy infrastructure); followed by immigration and small boats.

5. Respondents were able to select up to three options.

On the list below, select the top issues you believe are most important for the government to prioritise in 2023. (Please select up to three)
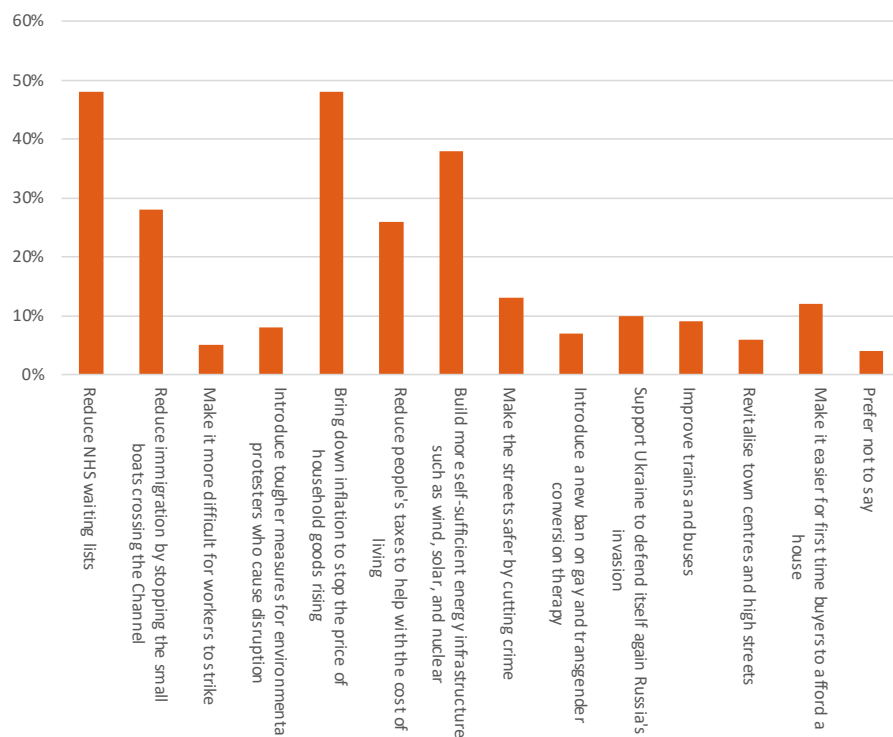
Demographic Differences

We are used to hearing that Britain is an increasingly polarised society. We are, we are told, divided by age, by class, by political affiliation. On some of the questions we polled, this is the case, as it is in other polls that Policy Exchange has run in the past – however, on the cost of living and improving the NHS, it is not.

In every single age category, social class, region, for both genders and for each political affiliation, *Bring down inflation to stop the price of household goods* and *Reduce NHS Waiting Lists* polled above 40% and were in the top three issues cited as a priority – and in 17 of the 20 splits, they were the top 2. They are overwhelmingly the issues that are concerning the general public, in every demographic.

Similarly, there is consistent support for the other two options connected to the cost of living: building more *Build more self-sufficient energy infrastructure, such as wind, solar and nuclear* has support from most demographics of 35-45%, and *Reduce people's taxes to help with the cost of living* has support in most demographics between 20% - 30%, with the exception that this drops to 12% amongst the over 65s[6]. This contributes to the interesting fact that a higher proportion of Labour voters (25%) than Conservative voters (20%) believe the Government should prioritise cutting taxes next year.

Of the most salient issues, the clear exception is *Reduce immigration by stopping the small boats crossing the Channel*. For Conservative and 1016 Leave voters, this was the highest priority issue, and for those aged 65+ the

6. This may explain why support for cutting taxes is higher amongst Labour voters, at 25% than amongst Conservative voters at 20%.

second highest priority issue. Only 7% of Labour voters, however, consider it to be a top priority and only 8% of those aged 18-24. 20% of the public as a whole, including 33% of Labour voters and 27% of those aged 18-24 think do not just think it is low priority, but actively oppose it.

Top 3	Public	2019 Conservative	2019 Labour
1	Bring down inflation to stop the price of household goods rising (48%)	Reduce immigration by stopping the small boats crossing the Channel (53%)	Reduce NHS waiting lists (55%)
2	Reduce NHS waiting lists (48%)	Reduce NHS waiting lists (44%)	Bring down inflation to stop the price of household goods rising (54%)
3	Build more self-sufficient energy infrastructure, such as wind, solar, and nuclear (38%)	Bring down inflation to stop the price of household goods rising (43%)	Build more self-sufficient energy infrastructure, such as wind, solar, and nuclear (49%)

Underlying support for longer term issues

The extraordinarily high salience of the cost of living and the NHS has significantly depressed the apparent salience of other issues, including those which are typically important to people such as crime or education. We should be cautious about interpreting this as meaning that people genuinely do not care about these issues. Crime, for example, had been rising in the YouGov 'most important issues facing the country' tracker, peaking at 21% in May 2021, before declining again as concerns over the economy steadily rose[7].

One indication of the residual importance of these issue can be seen from Question 6 in our poll, which asked where the Government should be willing to make savings. Only 2% of people of people selected *Reduce Public Spending on Schools* and the same proportion selected *Reduce public spending on the police*. This demonstrates the strong underlying public support for these services and shows that – while they are not currently seen to be in crisis – the potential for them to become flashpoints in the future if public service delivery in these areas is not maintained or improved. Policy Exchange's recent report, [Policing can Win](#), sets out fundamental recommendations for where here substantial changes must be made if the police are to be successful at in retaining the public's confidence, fighting crime and disorder, and keeping the public safe[8].

The polling also confirms the public's willingness to accept that deep-rooted challenges require long-term solutions. While *Build more self-sufficient energy infrastructure, such as wind, solar and nuclear* (which 38% identify as one of the highest priority issues, the third highest issue) almost certainly has increased salience due to the current energy crisis, fulfilling this would be a long-term endeavour with a significant but long-term payoff. Similarly, there is very low support for *Reduce spending on science and research*, with only 3% in favour, lower than any other potential saving other than the NHS,

7. https://yougov.co.uk/topics/education/ trackers/the-most-important-issues-facing-the-country

8. https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/ policing-can-win/

Schools or the Police.

Making it easier for first time buyers to afford a house enjoys modest support (20%) amongst the under 25s, with this decreasing with age. This subject is addressed in Policy Exchange's report, [Helping more people become First Time Buyers](#)[9].

Policies with strong opposition

As has been discussed above, many of the policies which are not ranked as high priority nevertheless appear to enjoy strong latent support, but simply have reduced salience due to the prominence of the cost of living and NHS crises. There are, however, some policies which a significant subset of the population actively oppose.

On the list below, are there any that you strongly disagree with and think the government should definitely not do? (Please select up to three)
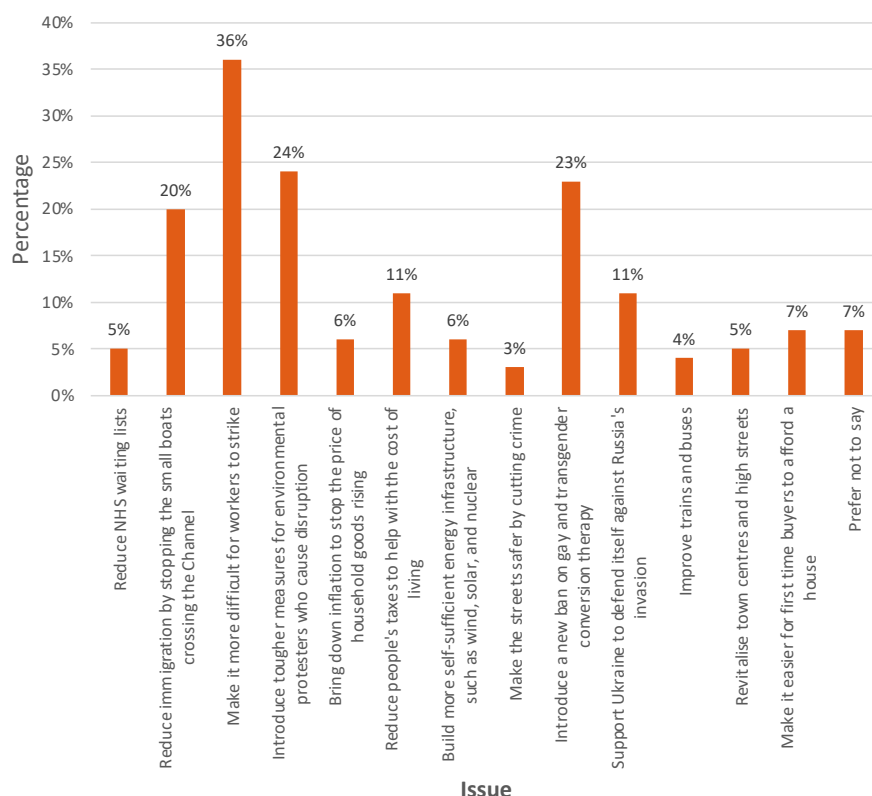
Three of these - *Reduce immigration by stopping the small boats crossing the Channel, Make it more difficult for workers to strike,* and *Introduce tougher measures for environmental protesters to cause disruption* – have very different responses across different demographics. Labour voters are much more likely to be opposed than Conservative voters, with Liberal Democrat voters somewhere in between; similarly, those under 25 are more likely to oppose these measures than those ages 65 or over.

Most opposition is to *Make it more difficult for workers to strike* (36%,

including 61% of Labour voters). Notably, Conservative voters appear to have a moderately high degree of sympathy for the current strikes than one might expect – 22% would oppose measures to make strikes harder and only 11% see it as a priority – though this sympathy is extended to a far lesser extent to environmental protesters or those crossing in the small boats.

The fourth area, *Introduce a new ban on gay and transgender conversion therapy*, is unlike those above in that opposition (23%) is much more consistent across different age groups, voting intentions and other demographics, sitting consistently between 18% and 25%, and varying much less than on the other three issues. There is thus a significant, active, opposition to this policy across all strata of society.

On the list below, are there any that you strongly disagree with and think the government should definitely not do? (Please select up to three)
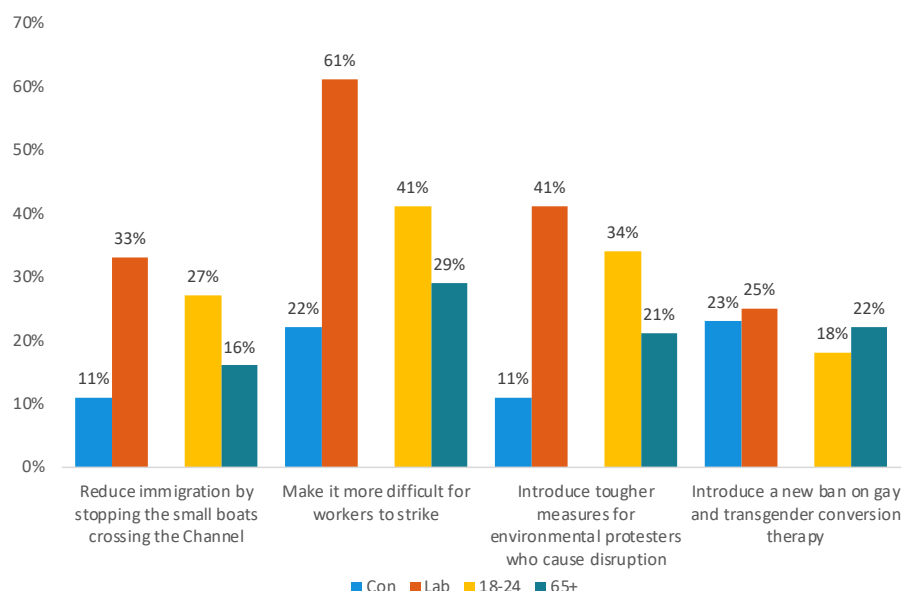

At a notably lower level, it is worth noting that both *Support Ukraine to defend itself against Russia i's invasion* and *Reduce people's taxes to help with the cost of living* were both actively opposed by 11% of people, reflecting a small but not insignificant minority who are opposed to lower taxes, or who are either isolationist or against this particular military activity. In both cases, opposition was spread relatively evenly across demographic groups, with it being slightly more prevalent amongst older people and in lower socio-economic classes.

These trends are reflected when the public was asked which was the single least important issue. *Introduce a new ban on gay and transgender conversion therapy* was identified as the lowest priority issue by the most people – 23%, almost a quarter of those polled – with, again, relative consistency across different demographics. *Make it more difficult for workers to strike* and *Introduce tougher measures for environmental protesters to cause disruption* were the only

two other measures to be selected by at least 10% of respondents, at 17% and 10% respectively.

On the list below, what is the one issue that is least important for the government to prioritise in 2023?
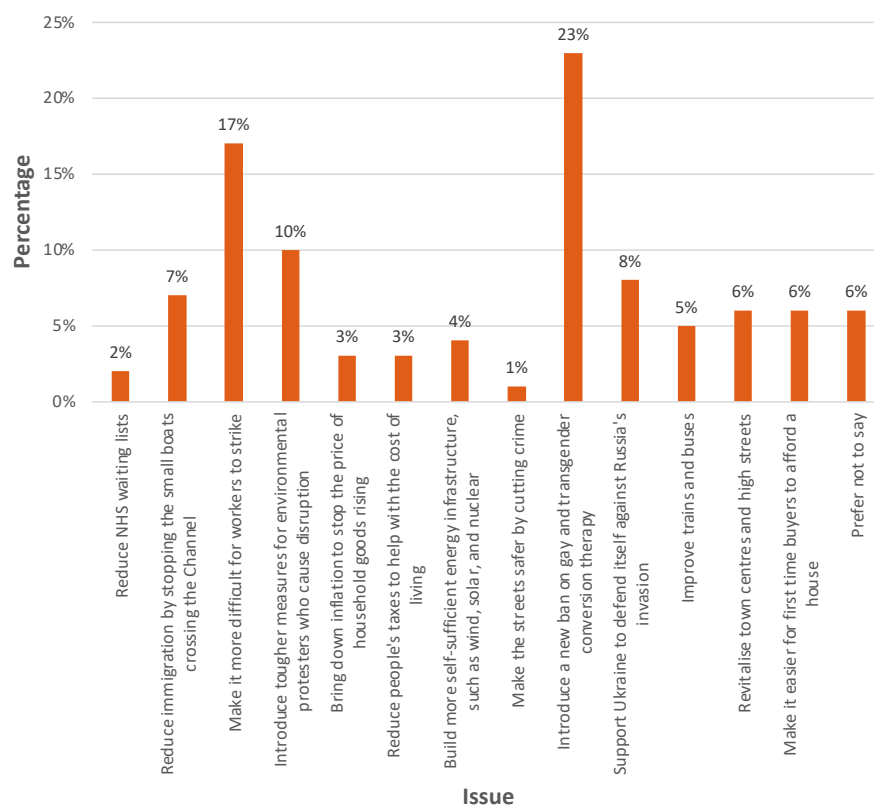
When considering the issues on which there is opposition, one stands out: *Reduce immigration by stopping the small boats crossing the Channel*. On the other three areas, opposition is relatively high, and few people actively consider these a priority (5%, 8% and 7% respectively for strikes, environmental protestors and banning conversion therapy).

By contrast, not only is opposition lower for Reduce immigration by stopping the small boats crossing the Channel (only 20%), but active support for this agenda is significantly higher, with 28% of respondents identifying it as a priority – including 53% of 2019 Conservative voters. It is the only policy – of these four – which more people identify as a priority than oppose. Accordingly, there remains a much more significant case, from a political perspective, for the Government to prioritise and deliver in this area, particularly if it wishes to win back those who voted Conservative in 2019. The Government should be aware, however, that, as discussed further below, faith in Government is very low. Talking tough and failing to deliver will do more harm than good: to win over the public, genuine achievement is needed. Policy Exchange has set out how this can be achieved in Stopping the Small Boats: A Plan 'B'[10], in Compassionate but Controlled[11], and From the Channel to Rwanda[12].

10. https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/stopping-the-small-boats-a-plan-b/
11. https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/compassionate-but-controlled/
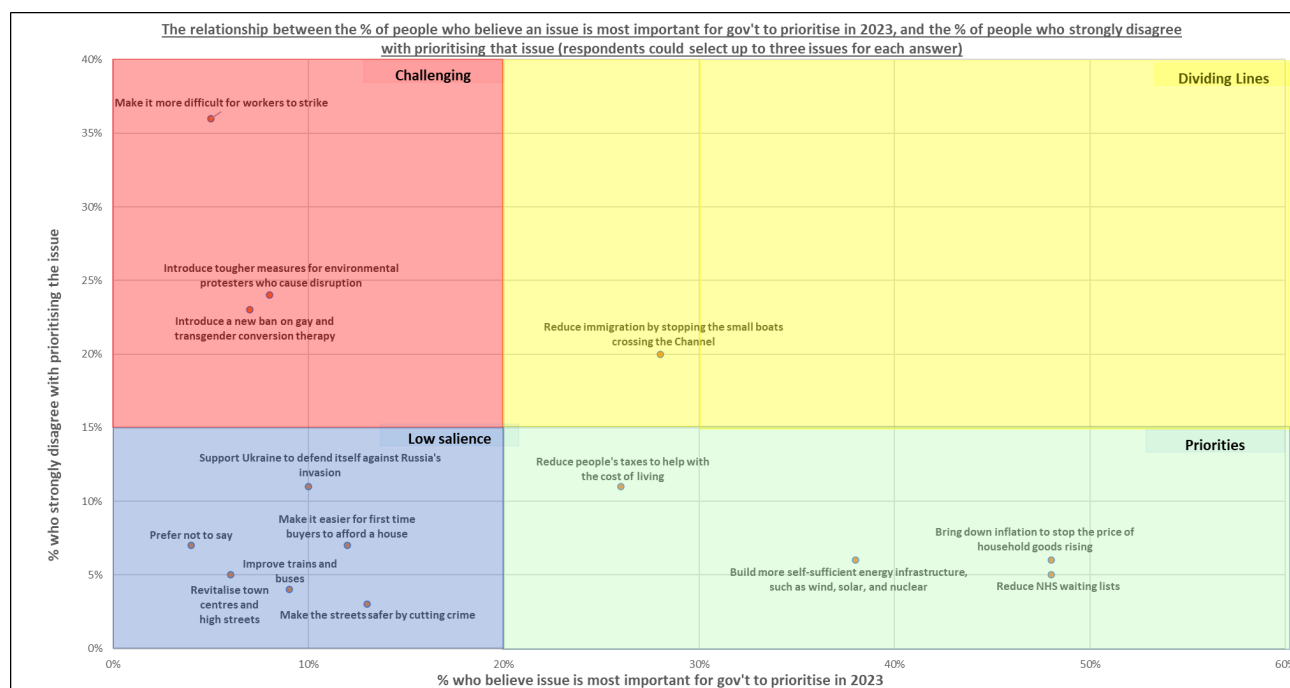12. https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/from-the-channel-to-rwanda/

The Good, the Bad and the Controversial

It goes without saying that any government should do what is right, not simply what is popular. Nevertheless, in a democracy, it is appropriate to take the views of the electorate into account – and public opinion can also shape the parameters of what is politically necessary and possible.

The polling can be used to segment the issues polled into four quadrants:

The relationship between the % of people who believe an issue is most important for gov't to prioritise in 2023, and the % of people who strongly disagree with prioritising that issue (respondents could select up to three issues for each answer)

Priorities are policies which many see as a priority and for which there is little opposition. The Government should strive to deliver these – particularly with regards to the cost of living and the NHS. Building more self sufficient energy infrastructure is also a relatively high priority – and would bring with it clear economic and environmental benefits, whilst deducing people's taxes to support the cost of living would enjoy moderate support, once the fiscal situation permits.

Dividing lines refers to policies that many people consider a priority, but a significant number also oppose. It contains one issue amongst those we polled: *reduce immigration by stopping the small boats crossing the Channel*. Addressing this issue is essential if the Government wishes to differentiate itself from the Opposition and regain the support of many of those who voted Conservative in 2019.

Low salience policies are those which are currently registering less strongly with the public either positively or negatively. Many of these are fundamentally important – education, crime, transport, defending Ukraine – and should continue to be pursued on their objective merits. If they go wrong, past history shows that these topics have the ability to rise rapidly up the public's agenda. However, the Government should not deceive itself that strong performance here will, in itself, shift the public's mood – and the Opposition is likely to find it difficult to significantly cut

through in these areas, at the current time.

Challenging policies are those which a low percentage of the public see as a priority but which have a high proportion of the public in opposition. Pursuing these will be politically challenging, which opponents likely to be more motivated and active than supporters. There may be good reasons why the Government should pursue these policies – for example, acting to *Make it more difficult for workers to strike* may have positive benefits for the economy and for public service delivery (which the public might ultimately appreciate) – but they should be aware that doing so will be politically challenging and prepare accordingly.

Savings

The current fiscal environment is highly challenging. Inflation is putting increasing pressure on household budgets and public services, taxes are at their highest level as a share of GDP for over half a century and the impact of the September mini-Budget on global bond markets confirmed that unsustainable borrowing is not an option. The recent Policy Exchange paper, [Balancing the Books](#)[13], set out a range of options for putting the public sector finances back on a sustainable path, some of which were adopted in the Government's autumn statement.

Where, however, would the public support saving being made? Our polling demonstrates three issues that overwhelmingly stand out, each of which would be supported by at least 30% of the public, whereas no other area polls more than 15%[14].

Recent economic forecasts suggest the government in Britain is spending more money than it raises each year from taxation. Where should the government make savings? (Please select up to three)
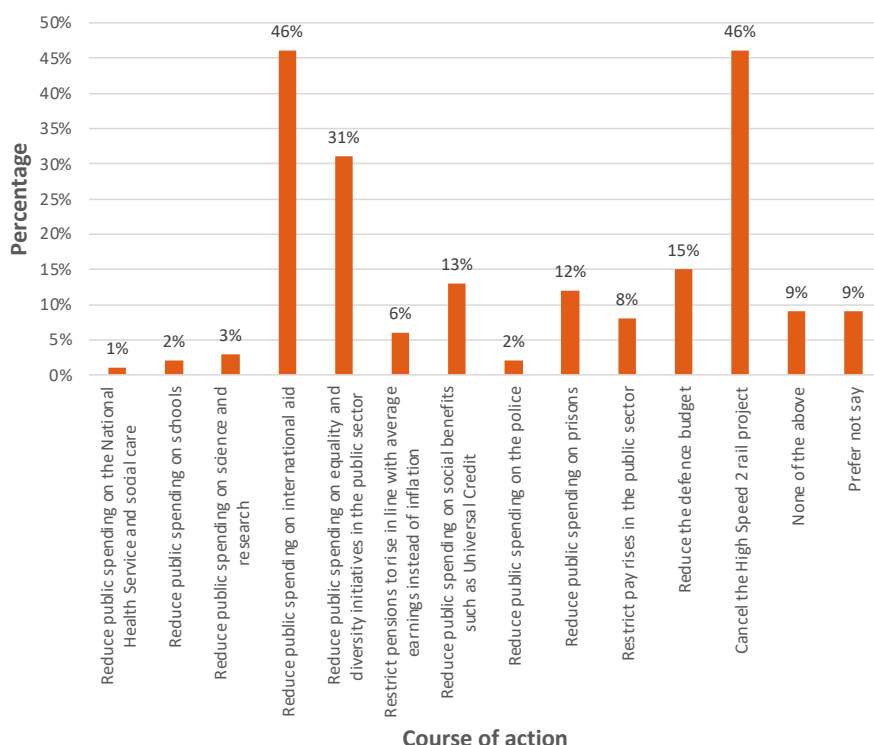
Cancel the High Speed 2 rail project is an extremely popular option, with 46% of respondents prioritising it for savings. This was examined in more depth in the recent Policy Exchange Paper, [HS2: The Kindest Cut of All,](#)[15] which

13. https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/balancing-the-books/

14. https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/hs2-the-kindest-cut-of-all/

15. It should be remembered that the public were asked to select up to three options. Some individuals may have wished to select more options and some will have accepted fewer. The fact that – for example – 46% of respondents selected *Cancel the High Speed 2 rail project* therefore represents a lower bound to those who would support its cancellation, and more detailed polling would be required to determine how many people would be neutral, or who would actively oppose.

found that, due to repeated cost overruns and downwards revision of expected benefits, the cost-benefit analysis for the project is now negative. It argued that *"Scaling back HS2 could alone deliver almost a tenth of the spending cuts required, £3bn per year by 2027/28, significantly more (up to £7bn per year) in later years and perhaps £44bn or more in total,"* and, furthermore, that *"Public support for HS2 is low everywhere, and even lower in the regions it supposedly benefits."* It is an obvious area for Government to make savings in order to release funds for tax cuts, cutting the deficit or investing in more worthwhile public services or capital investment.

Reduce public spending on international aid is equally popular, also with 46% of respondents prioritising it for savings. Although this policy is more popular amongst 2019 Conservative voters than 2019 Labour voters, it is still the third most popular area for savings amongst the latter. While there has always been a degree of scepticism on Britain's foreign aid budget, with criticisms levied at the management and efficiency of various programmes, the continued supply of aid to powerful nations such as India and China, with their own space programmes and nuclear weapons, and a continued failure to provide substantive evidence that foreign aid does make a material difference to the UK's soft power. With taxes at record levels, the NHS in crisis and the Government unable to afford inflation-matching pay rises for nurses and other public sector workers, the public appetite to continue sending such high amounts of taxpayers' money overseas is low. The average amount of overseas development assistance given across the 24 Development Assistance Committee countries is 0.33% of GNI[16], meaning that 0.5% of GNI remains high by international standards – there would clearly be space for the Government to reduce our contribute to 0.4%, saving £2bn a year, and remain above the international average.

Reduce public spending on equality and diversity initiatives in the public sector is the third area with significant public support which, though lower than the other two areas, remain substantial at 31%. While this is supported by 50% of Conservative voters and 51% of those aged over 65, it is supported by only 32% of Liberal Democrat voters, 15% of Labour voters and 16% of those aged 18-24 (though this remains higher than the proportion who support savings in almost all other areas). A recent report has found that approximately 10,000 public sector equality, diversity and inclusion jobs are costing the taxpayer £557m a year, as well as a million working days lost[17]; to take simply one, recent, highly paid example, an NHS Trust recently advertised for an £115,000 a year 'Director for Lived Experience.'[18] There is clearly the possibility of Government making significant savings in this area.

Finally, one proposal which had low overall support (15%) but had higher support among some demographics, including Labour voters (25%) and the under 25s (25%) was to *Reduce the defence budget*. Particularly given the growing global instability caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Policy Exchange does not recommend this course of action, while the Government should be looking to get greater value from its existing spending on defence, our current levels of spend should be, at

16. https://data.oecd.org/oda/net-oda.htm

17. Defunding Politically Motivated Campaigns https://www.conservativewayforward.com/defund
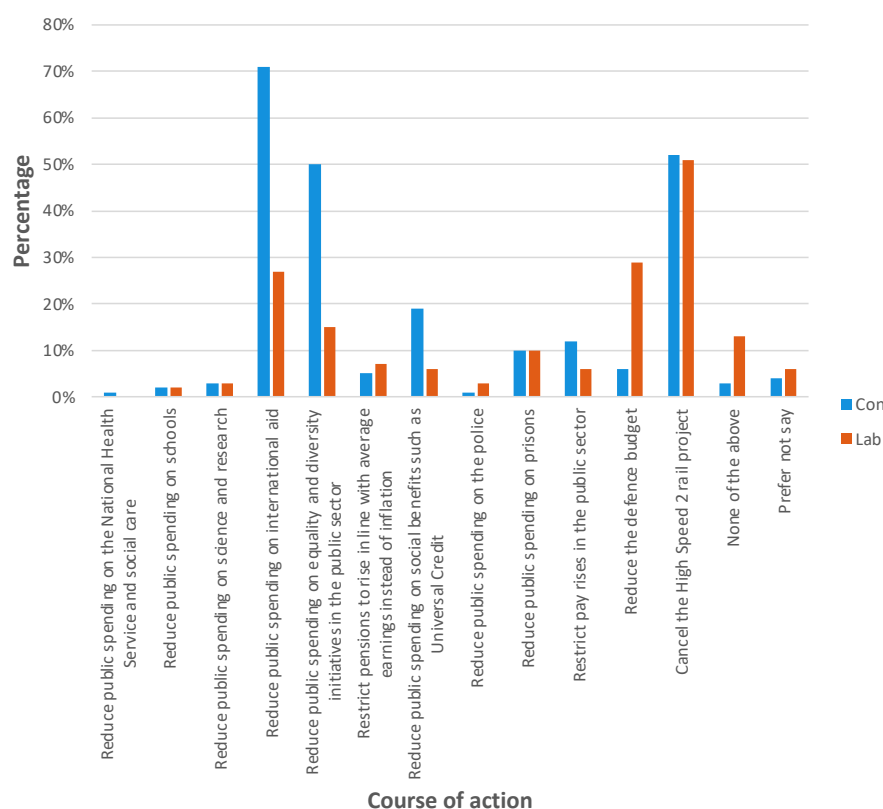
18. https://www.healthjobsuk.com/job/UK/Staffordshire/Stafford/Midlands_Partnership_NHS_Foundation_Trust/Director/Director-v4828381 accessed on 20 December 2022.

a minimum, maintained. Our recent report, [Affording the Integrated Review](#)[19], shows how the UK could be getting better value for money on defence procurement, highlighting the major inefficiencies in defence spending and procurement and how the money we currently allocate could be spent more effectively.

Top 3	Public	2019 Conservative	2019 Labour
1	Cancel the High Speed 2 rail project (46%)	Reduce public spending on international aid (71%)	Cancel the High Speed 2 rail project (51%)
2	Reduce public spending on international aid (46%)	Cancel the High Speed 2 rail project (52%)	Reduce the defence budget (29%)
3	Reduce public spending on equality and diversity initiatives in the public sector (31%)	Reduce public spending on equality and diversity (50%) initiatives in the public sector (50%)	Reduce public spending on international aid (27%)

More broadly, one can see that Conservative voters – as one might expect – are more likely to support savings in most areas, with the exception of defence and pensions.

Recent economic forecasts suggest the government in Britain is spending more money than it raises each year from taxation. Where should the government make savings? (Please select up to three)

The Government's Record and Perceptions

Thus far we have looked at what the public considers to be the Government's priorities. But what do they think of the Government's record?

The findings here are bleak. When asked what the Government has done well on since 2019, over 30% of those who responded said 'nothing' – a figure that rises further when other, similar, answers are included. Covid and vaccines; Brexit; Ukraine; and Furlough were positive achievements cited by respondents.

Clearly the Government has achieved things over the last three years. Trade deals have been negotiated; new skills qualifications, such as T-Levels and bootcamps have been rolled out; significant progress has been made towards the target of recruiting new police officers. Yet the tremendous salience of the two most pressing issues facing the country – cost of living and the NHS – is eclipsing people's perceptions of what has gone before.

An example that clearly demonstrates this is the furlough scheme. The furlough programme was a phenomenally expensive and far-reaching Government intervention, impacting 11.7 million people and costing £70bn. It directly touched the lives of millions in a very immediate way, was extremely popular, enjoyed a significant degree of cross-party support and is credited with preserving a large number of jobs through the pandemic. Yet it was cited by fewer than 30 people. If one of the most successful and popular Government programmes enjoys so little recollection just over a year on, it is clear that the Government must first deal with the current crises before it will be granted a fair hearing on its record.

The public also does not think the Government has a clear sense of purpose (net -50%), is standing up for British values such as free speech (net -40%) or is willing to take tough decisions for the long-term (net -29%). Both Conservative and Labour voters have a net negative view of the Government on the first two questions, while Conservative voters do believe, by a small positive margin of net +6%, that the Government is willing to take tough decisions for the long term.

This, combined with the polling on the Government's record, suggests that the Government has lost the benefit of the doubt with many voters. This in turn indicates that announcing ambitious policies – what is sometimes called 'red meat' – in areas such as stopping the small boats, is unlikely to convince, unless real evidence of delivery and improvement is evident.

We also asked what would give the Government the best chance of winning the next election.

Which of the following do you think will give the government the best chance of winning the next general election? (Please select up to three)
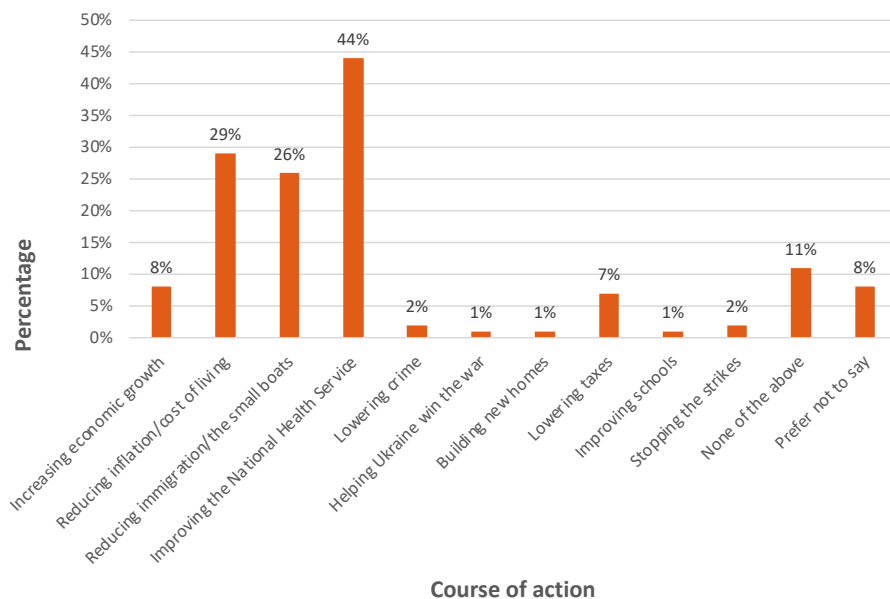
The findings largely mirror the earlier polling on priorities. In order to succeed at the next election, the public believe the Government will need to show genuine progress at improving the NHS (44%), tackling the cost of living (29%) and dealing with the small boats crisis (26%). For opposition parties these are likely the most fruitful areas in which to attempt to demonstrate that they would be more effective than the Government.

This is, of course, a snapshot. The fact that the public thinks now that these will be the most important issue at the next election – likely to be held almost two years away – does not imply that they will be. It is very possible that the economy may improve, inflation reduce and the immediate impact of the cost of living crisis could recede. It is equally possible that rising challenges in other areas – perhaps a crime wave, or a major teachers' strike – could significantly increase the salience of other issues.

What this polling does show, however, is where the public's concerns are now – and, unless matters improve on each of them, they are likely to continue to remain high in the national consciousness.

Conclusions

The public overwhelmingly believe that tackling the cost of living (48%) and reducing NHS waiting lists (48%) must be the Government's priorities for 2023 – a belief that cuts across all age groups, social classes and political affiliations. Cost of living was the single most common word or phrase entered when people were asked what the biggest problem in the UK was, and was cited by almost half of respondents as a top priority. Improving the NHS, meanwhile, was cited as the top thing the Government should do in order to win the next election.

Meanwhile, the highest priority for those who voted for the Conservative Party in 2019, at 53%, is reducing immigration by stopping the small boats crossing the Channel. Overall, this is considered a priority by over a quarter of all respondents – though is actively opposed by a third of Labour voters.

The ongoing energy crisis is reflected in strong public support for building more self-sufficient energy infrastructure, such as wind, solar and nuclear, while making it easier for first time buyers to afford a house enjoys modest support (20%) amongst the under 25s.

To ease the public finances, Three issues stand out as candidates for savings, each of which enjoy strong support from members of the public: cancelling High Speed 2, reducing spending on international aid and reduce public spending on equality and diversity initiatives.

Finally, the polling shows that the Government cannot run on its record – and that public faith in the Government is low. To win over the country, the Government will need more than just words, but must be able to demonstrate delivery: on the cost of living, on the NHS and on stopping the small boats. Delivering real, tangible and visible action on all three of these must be their priority for 2023.