

# The 2019 Conservative manifesto half-time analysis

What has the Johnson government achieved –  
and what is left to do?

# About this report

In January 2020 Boris Johnson's government delivered on perhaps its most central election pledge: to leave the EU. But two years on, as it looks ahead to 2022 and the second half of its term in office, there remains plenty still to do. This paper offers a 'half-time analysis' of the government's progress and finds three areas where it will need to work hardest to deliver the pledges in its 2019 manifesto: health, 'Global Britain' and net zero.

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An Annex listing all 287 manifesto pledges with our rating and analysis accompanies this report.

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## Introduction: manifestos still matter despite Covid

When Boris Johnson's Conservative government was elected with a majority of 80 seats after the general election of 12 December 2019, ministers and MPs did not expect the first half of their term to be dominated by the biggest public health emergency for at least a generation. In this context some former ministers have even suggested that the government could have chosen to abandon its manifesto.<sup>1</sup> But as the Institute for Government noted when taking stock of the document in April this year, the government has instead repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to it.<sup>2</sup>

In December 2020, on the first anniversary of the election, the home secretary wrote that "fighting coronavirus has demanded so much of us all... but this government has not forgotten the pledges you elected us on".<sup>3</sup> And in November 2021, when asked about the government's approach to standards in public life, the business secretary argued that evidence of the government's integrity lay in its commitment to delivering its manifesto.<sup>4,5</sup>

Indeed, the Covid crisis has meant that many of the key pledges in the Conservative manifesto have become more important, not less. The pandemic has exacerbated existing problems in public services like health and the courts and many of the actions promised in the manifesto will be important components of the post-Covid recovery, even if not written with a pandemic in mind.<sup>6</sup> The various commitments to increasing the number of health care workers, for example, will be key to reducing backlogs in the health system.

In an atmosphere of fragile public trust – a recent poll found 76% of people were concerned about corruption in government after a string of scandals about standards in public life – it is even more important for the government to keep promises made to the electorate.<sup>7</sup> Voters care whether pledges are delivered or not. A 2016 IfG/Populus poll found that when given several options for what UK politicians should prioritise and asked to choose the most important three, voters' most popular response was "fulfilling the promises they make before getting elected". Academic research has found that one of the qualities voters want to see in politicians is a propensity to "make promises that they can and will keep, and to keep their word when in office", and that voters' perceptions of the extent to which political parties have delivered on their promises can change the way they vote.<sup>8,9</sup> This does not mean that commitments must be pursued come what may. It is appropriate for governments to abandon pledges that would prove to be bad policy in practice. But for the sake of trust in politics, it is important that they are upheld wherever possible.

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Given the government's self-professed commitment to being judged on its manifesto, the extent to which it has been delivered is also a useful barometer for how well the administrative state is functioning. Manifesto pledges are a key political input into the machinery of state, and whether they are delivered is an indication of how capable that machinery is of translating political goals into concrete action.

Once the election has been and gone, the manifesto must go from words on a page to changes in the real world. For every commitment – aside from the very simple – making this happen relies on a wide range of people. Ministers must set consistent and strong political direction, policy makers draw up options and evaluate different approaches and operational delivery professionals implement the policy on the ground. Clearly not every manifesto pledge will be delivered. But in general, whether they are or not offers an insight into whether the links in this chain are working effectively.

In this paper we evaluate the government's progress on its manifesto so far. After just over two years in office, slightly over half (55%) of its pledges are completed or on track to be completed, including some of the most consequential. However, we also find that other key pledges, and 41 overall, are at risk of failure, or have been delayed, suspended or abandoned. These, along with all 287 individual pledges, are listed in the Annex of this paper, with accompanying analysis.

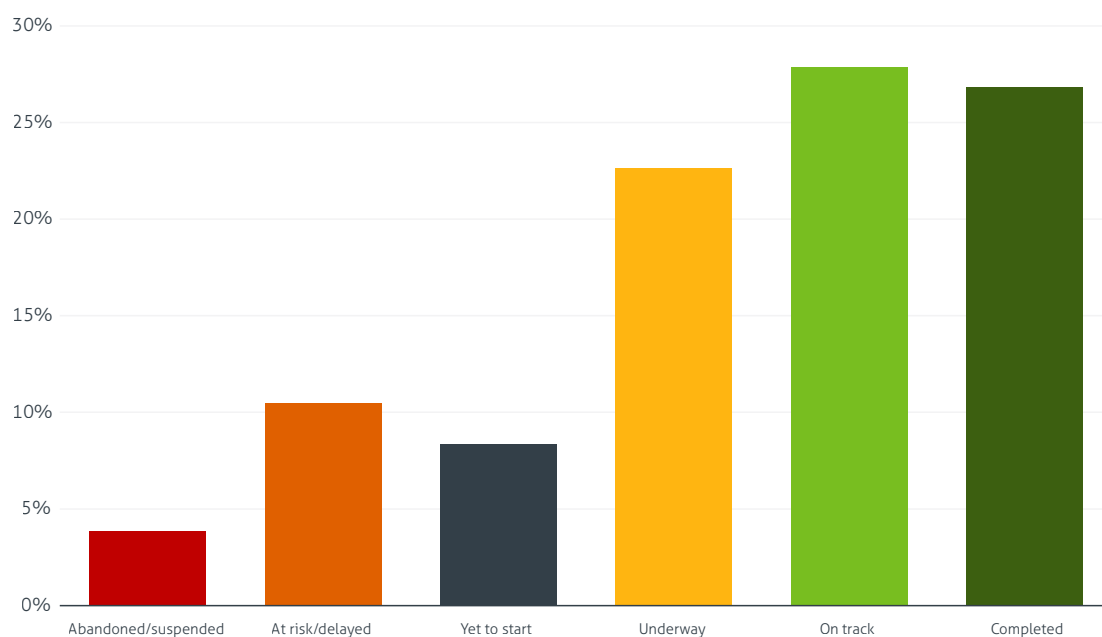
Shortly after taking office the government delivered on perhaps its most central election pledge, to leave the EU. And on Christmas Eve last year, the Trade and Cooperation Agreement with the EU was agreed, fulfilling the commitment to negotiate Britain's future relationship by the end of 2020. But this December, as the government looks ahead to 2022 and the second half of its term in office, there remains plenty still to do. Below, we analyse three areas of substance where the government has the most work to do to deliver the pledges in its manifesto: health, 'Global Britain' and net zero. Good progress in these areas would go a long way towards allowing the government to legitimately claim success in delivering on its manifesto by the end of its term in office.

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## Has the government lived up to its promises?

Overall, the government has completed, or is on track to complete, 55% of its promises; 23% are underway, meaning either that some progress has been made but not enough to say that the pledge is on track for completion, or that relevant legislation has been introduced to parliament but has not been passed; 14% are at risk, or have been delayed, suspended or abandoned; and 8% are yet to start.

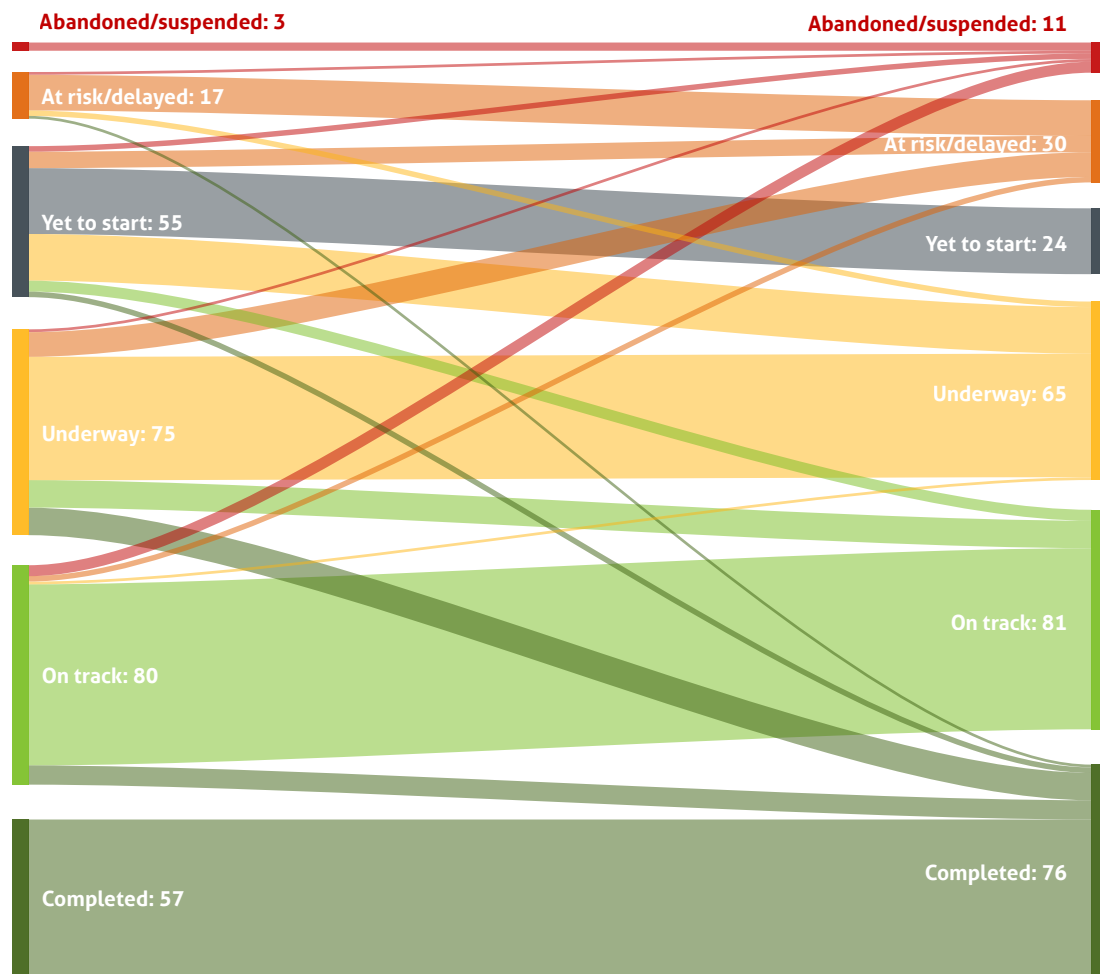
Figure 1 **Percentage of 2019 Conservative manifesto commitments by progress rating**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of the 2019 Conservative manifesto. Our analysis of each pledge is supplied in the Annex.

These numbers are an improvement since the Queen's Speech in April, the last time we assessed the government's progress. Nineteen more pledges are now completed, while progress has been made on 23 promises that were yet to start in April. However, the number of pledges at risk or delayed pledges has doubled, from 17 to 30.

Figure 2 **Progress of 2019 Conservative manifesto commitments since April 2021**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of the 2019 Conservative manifesto. Our analysis of each pledge is supplied in the Annex. Pledges as of April 2019 can be found in a previous Institute for Government report: [Taking stock of the Conservative manifesto](#).

However, the raw numbers do not give the full picture. Not all promises are equal: the electorate values some more than others; some are more important to good government; and some are more difficult to deliver.<sup>10</sup> For example, the pledge to extend the ‘bikeability’ cycling proficiency scheme to all children is easier to deliver and less consequential than the pledge to build 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s. Of what we judge to be the government’s most important commitments, a good number are complete or on track, as shown in the following table:

Pledge	Rating
Leave the EU in January [2020]	<b>Completed</b>
Negotiate a trade agreement [in 2020] with the EU	<b>Completed</b>
£34bn per year by the end of the parliament in additional funding for the NHS – more than £650m extra a week by the end of the parliament	<b>Completed</b>
End the benefits freeze	<b>Completed</b>
Introduce a firmer and fairer Australian-style points-based immigration system, prioritising people with a good grasp of English, good education and qualifications, a job offer, and who have been law-abiding citizens in their own countries	<b>Completed</b>
Continue to work with all sides to re-establish the Northern Ireland executive and assembly	<b>Completed</b>
Towns Fund to go to an initial 100 towns to improve their local economy – and they and only they will make the choice about what improvements their local area needs	<b>On track</b>
Recruit 20,000 new police officers	<b>On track</b>
Provide an extra £14bn in funding for schools, including at least £5,000 per year for each secondary school pupil and £4,000 for each primary school pupil	<b>On track</b>
Free our farmers from the bureaucratic Common Agricultural Policy and move to a system based on 'public money for public goods'	<b>On track</b>
£100bn in additional infrastructure spending – including on roads and rail, and £4bn in new funding for flood defences	<b>On track</b>

Source: Institute for Government analysis. Commitments chosen according to their prominence and scale in comparison to other commitments. Our analysis of these pledges is supplied in the Annex to this paper.



But the government has also abandoned or suspended 11 promises since 2019, many of which had been substantial parts of its agenda. The total of 65 promises that are yet to start, at risk, delayed, suspended or abandoned include some of the most difficult to deliver and consequential commitments in the manifesto.

Pledge	Rating
Debt will be lower at the end of the parliament	<b>Abandoned</b>
The prerequisite of any social care solution will be a guarantee that no one needing care has to sell their home to pay for it	<b>Abandoned</b>
Offer an 'arts premium' to secondary schools	<b>Abandoned</b>
Not raise the rate of National Insurance	<b>Abandoned</b>
Keep the pensions triple lock	<b>Suspended</b>
Build Northern Powerhouse Rail between Leeds and Manchester	<b>Abandoned</b>
Roll-out full fibre and gigabit-capable broadband to every home and business across the UK by 2025	<b>Abandoned</b>
Reach an additional 75,000 acres of trees a year by the end of the next parliament, building on support for creating a Great Northumberland Forest	<b>Abandoned</b>
Increase the defence budget by at least 0.5% above inflation every year of the new parliament	<b>Abandoned</b>
Maintain our commitment to spend 0.7% of GNI on development	<b>Suspended</b>
End the preventable deaths of mothers, new-born babies and children [worldwide] by 2030	<b>Abandoned</b>

Source: Institute for Government analysis. See Annex for methodology.

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## **Making incompatible promises does not lead to good government**

Many of the promises that have been abandoned or are at risk are in that state because their substance, and how they interact with other pledges, had not been properly thought through.<sup>11</sup>

The 2019 manifesto's approach to public finances is a good example. The Conservatives promised not to raise any of the main rates of income tax, National Insurance or VAT (the 'tax triple lock'), while also promising to reduce debt as a share of national income and not borrow to fund day-to-day spending. At the same time, the party made several ambitious promises to address some of the biggest issues facing the country, like reforming social care (an issue that has bedevilled successive governments), improving digital and physical connectivity, and providing 'world-class' public services. Even without the impact of coronavirus, upholding this combination of pledges – requiring more spending but without borrowing more or increasing any of the main taxes – was always unlikely to be sustainable across a full term in office.

The coronavirus crisis and subsequent economic fallout waylaid the commitment to lower debt by the end of the parliament, as the government's response to the pandemic required a huge increase in borrowing. But while there is no doubting the devastating short-term fiscal effects of the pandemic, in the medium term Covid's impact on the economy, and therefore on tax receipts and ongoing annual borrowing, is expected to be relatively modest. While the government blamed the pandemic for breaking its promise not to raise National Insurance when it announced the Health and Social Care Levy – in part to pay for its new social care policy, expected to cost more than £2bn by 2024/25 – the contradictions that led to this National Insurance rise were present even before Covid struck.<sup>12,13</sup> For the Conservatives to deliver the manifesto's ambitious suite of spending pledges, they were always very likely to have to find new money from somewhere – either by raising one of the main taxes (violating the tax triple lock) or borrowing money (and breaking the pledge not to borrow for day-to-day spending).

Indeed, by pledging the tax triple lock the Conservatives were promising not to use the main levers available to governments when they need to raise substantial sums of money. Income tax, National Insurance and VAT account for two thirds of the overall tax take, and are relatively efficient taxes to raise because they are broad-based and paid by large numbers of people. That means the effects of any increase are spread thinly with minimal avoidance opportunities. Raising these tax rates is the simplest and least economically damaging option when trying to raise substantial revenue. Committing not to do so was not sensible, and it was never clear how the Conservatives would raise the money required to embark upon the ambitious spending programmes mentioned in its manifesto.<sup>14</sup>

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There were, of course, obvious political advantages to pledging not to raise taxes or borrow to fund day-to-day spending while simultaneously committing to address substantial (and often expensive) policy problems. But the contradictions between those positions meant that it was highly unlikely that they could all be delivered at the same time. Given the importance voters place on the manifesto, and the weight that policy makers put on it when assessing what policy options are acceptable to present to ministers, it was unwise for the Conservative Party, in its capacity as a potential government, to commit to such a set of pledges.

This problem is, of course, not one just with the 2019 manifesto, nor something confined to the Conservative Party – at the last election, the Institute questioned the reconcilability of Labour’s fiscal commitments as well.<sup>15</sup> And if a manifesto’s primary objective is to help secure a party’s election, then the 2019 document served its purpose. Manifestos will always have a strong political element, but after an election they become the victorious party’s programme for government. Baking contradictions into that programme will cause problems once a party is in government and should – where at all possible – be avoided.

## Looking ahead to 2022 and beyond

The government is entering the second part of its parliamentary term, and with limited time before the next election its emphasis necessarily turns to delivery. Our analysis of the progress made on the manifesto so far highlights three areas of substance where the government has the most work to do to deliver its pledges. These are health, 'Global Britain' and net zero. Notably, 'levelling up' is not one of these areas. While the manifesto contained some pledges that can be tied to this agenda – most prominently the Towns Fund – there was little substance overall. This is one of the reasons why there are still questions as to what exactly 'levelling up' means, and why there is so much resting on the forthcoming levelling up white paper.<sup>16</sup>

### Health

Speaking on the Downing Street steps the day after the 2019 election, the prime minister declared that he had received clear instructions from the British people: that "we should focus above all on the NHS".<sup>17</sup> But while the government has delivered on its commitment to invest record sums into the health service – spending on NHS England is planned to be £38.9bn higher in 2024/25 than 2019/20 in cash terms – it is off track on numerous other health-related pledges.

Pledge	Rating
Improve the early diagnosis and treatment of all major conditions	<b>Underway</b>
Build and fund 40 new hospitals over the next 10 years	<b>At risk</b>
Bring down operating waiting times	<b>At risk</b>
Improve A&E performance	<b>At risk</b>
Increase cancer survival rates	<b>At risk</b>
Make the NHS the best place in the world to give birth	<b>At risk</b>
50,000 more nurses	<b>At risk</b>
6,000 more GPs	<b>At risk</b>
6,000 more primary care professionals e.g. pharmacists and physiotherapists, on top of 20,000 previously announced	<b>At risk</b>
50 million extra GP appointments per year	<b>At risk</b>
Ensure that new GP and school places are delivered ahead of people moving into new housing developments	<b>Yet to start</b>

Source: Institute for Government analysis. See Annex.

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Clearly some of these pledges have been directly affected by coronavirus; in particular, those to improve early diagnosis and treatment and to improve NHS performance. The pandemic created a huge additional pressure on the NHS, which prioritised resources and stopped much routine activity in order to treat Covid patients. But even prior to the pandemic the UK lagged behind other comparable countries on health outcomes and survival rates for diseases such as cancer, while NHS performance consistently failed to hit waiting time targets.<sup>18,19</sup> The pandemic exacerbated these problems, but it did not cause them.

Meanwhile, in other areas government pledges are off target despite not being directly affected by the pandemic. Examples of these are the promises to build 40 new hospitals, to hire 50,000 more nurses, 6,000 more GPs and 26,000 more primary care professionals, and to make 50 million extra GP appointments available per year.

Even though initially promised to address longer-standing problems with the health service, this latter set of pledges have become even more important in the context of Covid. The stated rationale behind hiring extra staff and building new hospitals is to acquire extra capacity to triage, diagnose and treat people. With large backlogs threatening the availability and standard of NHS care over the next few years, this extra capacity is urgently needed (even if in practice the plans for “40 new hospitals” fall well short of the rhetoric).<sup>20</sup>

Delivering on its more operational commitments is also crucial for the government. If the prime minister believes that the British people want his administration to focus above all on the NHS, then an overriding mission should be to improve the state of the health service after Covid in the areas already identified as problems before it.

From the perspective of delivering its manifesto promises, it is positive that the government has made improving the performance of the health system one of the key components of its plan to ‘build back better’ from the pandemic. Health is listed as one of the No.10 Delivery Unit’s five key areas of work, while an NHS-specific delivery unit has been established.<sup>21,22</sup> Sir Michael Barber, who has advised on the creation of both units, wrote in October 2021 that delivering improved outcomes in the health service was the central challenge of the remainder of the Johnson administration.<sup>23</sup>

How well these two units work together will be an important determinant of whether the government is successful in its ambitions. Given the No.10 unit’s intended focus on health encroaches on the NHS unit’s territory, there must be a clear division of labour, unambiguously defined accountabilities and clear communication between the two of them. This cannot be solved by a fudge; poorly defined remits can severely undermine delivery units.<sup>24</sup> The units must also retain the authority of the prime minister and health secretary to allow them to press for change.<sup>25</sup>

## Global Britain

The 2019 manifesto was more focused on 'getting Brexit done' and the government's domestic agenda than setting out the UK's post-Brexit future. But it did contain some specific pledges relevant to what it describes as 'Global Britain'. Three major pledges in this area have already been suspended or abandoned, at a cost to Britain's hard and soft power. In particular, despite the government's stated plan to return to spending 0.7% of gross national income on aid "when the fiscal situation allows", the cut to international aid has damaged the UK's international relationships:<sup>26,27,28,29,30</sup>

Pledge	Rating
Increase the defence budget by at least 0.5% above inflation every year of the new parliament	<b>Abandoned</b>
Maintain our commitment to spend 0.7% of GNI on development	<b>Suspended</b>
End the preventable deaths of mothers, new-born babies and children [worldwide] by 2030	<b>Abandoned</b>

Source: Institute for Government analysis of the 2019 Conservative manifesto. See Annex.

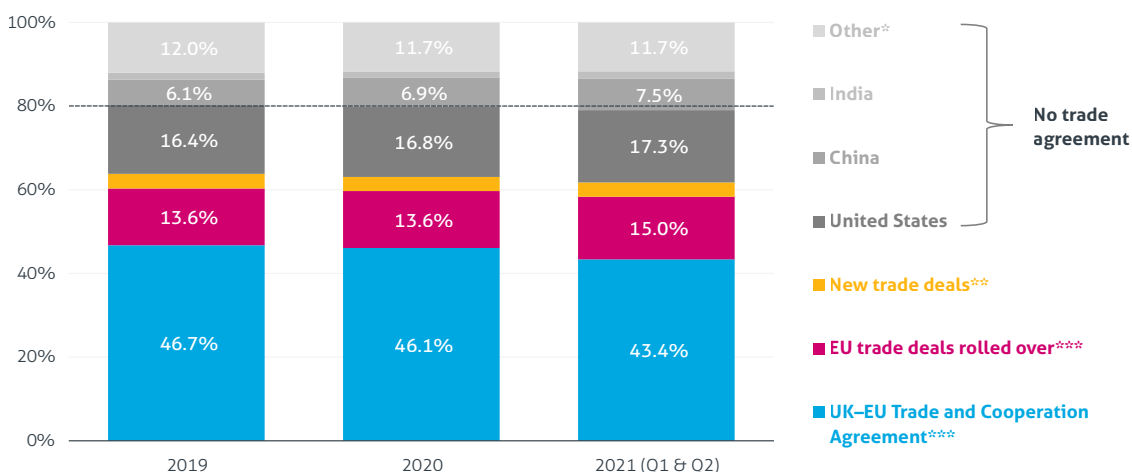
With the Global Britain agenda expressed in the manifesto faltering, to revive it there is increased pressure to deliver on another of its key elements – trade:

Pledge	Rating
Aim to have 80% of UK trade covered by free trade agreements within the next three years, starting with the US, Australia, New Zealand and Japan	<b>At risk</b>
Create up to 10 freeports around the UK	<b>Underway</b>
Aim to ensure that our new freeports benefit the people in each of the four nations	<b>At risk</b>

Source: Institute for Government analysis. See Annex.

The government has not yet delivered on its promise to have 80% of UK trade covered by free trade agreements: figures for 2021 (Q1 and Q2) show just 61.8% of trade is covered. Of that, almost all is made up by the UK–EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement and the 35 EU trade deals that have been successfully 'rolled over' (some of which are not yet fully in force and/or contain provisions requiring renegotiation of certain terms at a later point). The government has also successfully negotiated a deal with Japan to replace the EU–Japan agreement, recently signed a free trade agreement with Australia and has an agreement in principle on a deal with New Zealand.

Figure 3 Percentage of total UK trade covered by trade deals, December 2021



Source: Institute for Government analysis of ONS, UK total trade: all countries, non-seasonally adjusted dataset, April to June 2021. Total trade = total exports + total imports. For agreements without bars labelled, percentage of trade is the following: India (2019 = 1.7%, 2020 = 1.5%, 2021 (Q1 & Q2) = 1.8%), new trade deals (3.5%, 3.4%, 3.4%). \* = Includes EU trade deals not yet rolled over but under discussion. \*\* = Includes trade in given period that is covered by deals agreed as of November 2021, including deals agreed in principle. \*\*\*Includes trade in given period that is covered by deals agreed as of November 2021.

However, to meet its manifesto commitment the government would need to agree a trade deal with the US. This was one of the main planks of Vote Leave’s victorious referendum campaign and was mentioned as a priority by Johnson during his Conservative Party leadership campaign.<sup>31</sup> Negotiations began in May 2020 with the Trump administration, but have since stalled.<sup>32</sup> Despite some small steps – for example, in September 2021, the US announced it would lift a decades-old ban on imports of UK sheep meat – in recent months the UK government has struck a more cautious tone.<sup>33</sup> Johnson has refused to confirm if he still expects the UK to secure a US trade deal by the next election.<sup>34</sup>

Given the current state of trade negotiations with the US, the government looks unlikely to meet its manifesto commitment. While agreeing a US trade deal is not entirely within the government’s own power, failure to do so would cast doubt on a Global Britain agenda premised on seizing what was portrayed as an opportunity of Brexit to strike such a deal.

Another component of post-Brexit trade strategy outlined in the manifesto were promises to create freeports across the UK – designated zones in which businesses can manufacture goods using imports and add value before exporting again without

paying the full tariff on the original goods imported.<sup>35</sup> The chancellor, Rishi Sunak, has argued these freeports would provide an “unprecedented economic boost across the United Kingdom”, although the Office for Budgetary Responsibility has said that their main effect will be to “alter the location rather than the volume of economic activity”.<sup>36,37</sup>

Some progress has been made. Funding for eight freeports was announced in the March 2021 budget and the Teesside and Thames freeports are now operational.<sup>38,39,40</sup> But the promise that they would benefit all four nations of the UK is at risk. There are disagreements in approach between the UK government and the Scottish government, which is considering launching a competing model of freeport called a ‘green port’.<sup>41</sup> The Welsh government is openly sceptical of the UK government’s current plans.<sup>42</sup> And there has been a lack of any meaningful progress in Northern Ireland. All this suggests that the freeports policy may be exacerbating tensions within the union, rather than projecting a powerful ‘Global Britain’ to the world.

## Net zero

The third area requiring major attention is the government’s programme to set the UK on a path to net zero by 2050. Some elements of this are closely related to the Global Britain agenda, with the UK having hosted the COP26 climate summit in November and striving to be seen as a global leader on net zero and environmental protection more generally. At COP26, 110 countries signed a new agreement that aims to end and reverse deforestation by 2030 and committed to sustainable and wildlife-friendly land use – delivering on a manifesto commitment to set up such an international partnership. The Blue Belt scheme to protect marine wildlife has also been extended, as the manifesto pledged.

Most of the manifesto commitments made on net zero and the environment, however, were domestically focused. Many of these have been completed, or are on track to be completed. For example, new laws on air quality have been passed, £800m has been allocated to building the first fully deployed carbon capture storage cluster by the mid-2020s, a new levy has been introduced to increase the proportion of recyclable plastics in packaging and an independent Office for Environmental Protection has been provisionally established. However, big questions remain on the progress of some other pledges – most notably, the core commitment to reach net zero by 2050:

Pledge	Rating
Net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050	Underway
Invest £9.2bn in the energy efficiency of homes, schools and hospitals	At risk
Invest £1bn in completing a fast-charging network to ensure that everyone is within 30 miles of a rapid electric vehicle charging station	Underway

Source: Institute for Government analysis. See Annex.



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The government's recent net zero strategy was an important step forward – the Climate Change Committee (CCC) described it as “align[ing] to the UK's emissions targets of Net Zero by 2050”. However, it still contained some big gaps and optimistic assumptions, and there are questions about how many of the policies and targets within it will be delivered.<sup>43</sup> The strategy was vague on agriculture and land use, for example, with a broad aim to get more farmers “engaged in low carbon practices”. It remains unclear whether the scale of investment into energy efficiency promised in the manifesto will materialise. And while more than £2.5bn has been allocated to public charging for electric vehicles, it is unclear whether this will be enough to “ensure that everyone is within 30 miles of a rapid electric vehicle charging station”. More widely, while the strategy made positive noises about the need to engage the public on net zero, it was short on detail. Without public consent, making the necessary changes to get to net zero by 2050 will be extremely difficult.

Getting the governance right will be critical to achieving such an economy-wide transformation. Delays to climate strategies and mixed messages when communicating to the public suggests that the government still needs stronger co-ordination at the centre – the Institute has previously argued for a powerful net zero unit in the Cabinet Office, led by a senior Cabinet Office minister.<sup>44</sup> A strong central function will be essential to keep departments on track for the emissions trajectories they have committed to – and to ensure that government is able to adapt if some technologies do not improve as quickly as expected. Departments should make good on the government's commitment to involve the public in the transition by building deliberative processes into their policy making. The Treasury should also commit to a net zero audit to ensure the tax system supports the transition to net zero, and ensure all future tax changes are net zero proofed.<sup>45</sup>

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## Conclusion

With a maximum of two and a half years left of its parliamentary term, the government is entering the phase where it will have to emphasise delivery. Some of the manifesto has already unravelled, not least the pledges on tax. The prime minister has blamed the pandemic, but while that has undoubtedly made the fiscal context more difficult, the manifesto's contradictions were apparent from the start.

The government 'got Brexit done' and has completed, or is on track to complete, 55% of its manifesto pledges. But it has made little headway on, suspended or abandoned, some of its most consequential commitments. Ministers remain vocally committed to the manifesto, and to succeed in delivering it the government has work to do, most notably in the areas of health, 'Global Britain' and net zero. The government's progress on these issues will go a long way to determining whether it can legitimately claim to have been successful in delivering its manifesto by the end of its time in office.

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