

The People's NHS

What are the public's top priorities for the re-elected Government on health and social care?

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Executive summary

The public wants the NHS to recruit more doctors and nurses as the new Government's biggest priority. 42% of voters cited a shortage of doctors and nurses as one of their three biggest concerns for the NHS and 61% want investment in these professionals prioritised by the Conservatives.

Voters in the North (45%) and Midlands (39%) were particularly concerned by shortages of doctors and nurses, whereas in London and the South the top issue was waiting times.

Delivering on the manifesto pledges of the new Government to recruit 50,000 more nurses and 6,000 GPs looks likely to be of central importance in these areas over the coming five years.

System pressures also featured prominently in voters' areas of concern.

Waiting times for treatment (37%), perhaps affected by the publication of the worst figures on record on the 13th December, were the second most regular cited issue of concern, followed by getting a GP appointment (31%). The new administration will need to ensure that the NHS Long Term Plan delivers improvements in these areas and that a pledge to get 50 million GP appointments to patients proceeds at pace. Commitments to review waiting times for treatment in hospital will need to show they will address these public concerns, as well as being clinically sound.

Voters are also clear that they want investment in areas which reduce waste, with 34% naming it in their top three priorities and Conservative voters and C2 voters particularly keen to see strong action on this and on wider NHS misuse (where the gap between C2 voters and the wider public is 10%). The Government should ensure that new investment in technology through the newly created NHSX by the Secretary of State is prioritised for frontline services that can support a more efficient, well run system.

Other areas where voters want to see investment are mental health services (25%), social care (21%) and new capital funding for hospitals and hospital upgrades (21%), showing that the NHS Long Term Plan settlement alone will not be sufficient to deliver for voters and a more rounded, connected approach to health and social care policy will need to be undertaken in the next five years to get traction and cut through.

Voters appear broadly happy with the quality of NHS care and safety, seeing these as lower priority investment areas; and perhaps testament to the focus of the system in recent years following scandals such as Mid Staffordshire.

Finally voters are clear that the Government is responsible for the performance of the NHS. 71% see the Secretary of State and Government as accountable, with just 8% as the CEO of NHS England. As part of its new NHS Bill the Government must ensure that new structures deliver improved accountability and clarity of responsibility for the management and performance of the NHS.

Recommendations for Government

- Ensure the forthcoming NHS Bill delivers improved accountability of NHS performance alongside structural reforms
- Set out clear goals and accountability for the delivery of staff commitments in the manifesto, led by the Department and Ministers
- Use NHSX to tackle waste and inefficiency, supporting staff and patients
- Alongside the NHS Long Term Plan, set out a wider health and care strategy to deliver improved health and wellbeing for the nation. This should include a robust, funded People Plan, progress on social care funding reform through a triple lock on cross party negotiations¹, a long term capital funding programme for the NHS and an ambitious response to the Prevention Green Paper
- Deliver a new set of access commitments to services that are clinically robust and have public support and hold the system to account on delivering them

Introduction

Many have labelled the Conservative majority of 80 at the 2019 election as a direct result of Brexit.

But in many ways this election was also an NHS election.

Indeed a snap poll of 13,000 voters by Lord Ashcroft following the result found that the NHS was the most regularly cited of all issues flagged by voters in deciding their vote.

The Prime Minister's message of 'Get Brexit done' and then invest in public services was always followed with a prominent message on the NHS.

At a victory rally, the Prime Minister set out that the NHS would be this "One Nation" Conservative Government's' number one priority. Billions of new investment is planned to improve the quality of care, build and upgrade hospitals and hire more staff.

But what do the public want from their NHS and where do they want focus, energy and resources prioritised? And what does this mean for the next five years of health and social care policy.

1. The triple lock on social care includes a senior negotiating team, a clear timeline, and a commitment that if the talks fail the Government will go ahead and consult the public on plans to fund social care that protect the family home – see <https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/The-First-Hundred-Days.pdf>

Methodology

Working with strategy and polling firm JL Partners, Policy Exchange polled 2000 voters across the UK on the weekend of the 13-15th December to find out.

Five questions were asked assessing people's use of the NHS, their concerns, their priorities for investment and their views on accountability (see Appendix).

Key findings

1. The public's main concerns about the NHS

- **The public's biggest worry about the NHS is a shortage of doctors and nurses.** Given a list of areas to choose from, 42% put "shortages of nurses and doctors" in their top three concerns about the National Health Service. This makes the Conservative Party's pledge for 50,000 more nurses seem especially relevant, with the public placing this as their main concern

Table 1: Thinking about the following aspects of the NHS, which are you most worried about?

Issue	% naming issue as one of their top three concerns	% naming issue as their top concern
Shortages of nurses and doctors	42%	16%
Waiting times between being diagnosed and being treated	37%	13%
Getting a GP appointment quickly enough	31%	13%
Pressures on Accident and Emergency units	30%	9%
People misusing the NHS	26%	8%
Shortages of beds in hospitals	24%	6%
Money being wasted	23%	8%
Social care for the elderly	19%	5%
The standard of care in your local hospital	11%	3%
The standard of care from your GP	11%	4%
Pay for frontline NHS staff	10%	3%
Cleanliness and hygiene in the NHS	8%	2%
The distance to the nearest hospital	5%	2%
None of these	3%	3%
Don't know	4%	4%

- This is closely followed by **waiting times between being diagnosed and being treated**, chosen as a top three concern by 37% of the public. **Getting a GP appointment quickly enough** was chosen by 31% of the public

- When looked at what people chose as their number one concern, **shortages of nurses and doctors again came top with 16% naming it their main concern**, and 13% opting for waiting times, and another 13% choosing getting a GP appointment quickly enough
- Other areas which scored highly in people's top three concerns were pressures on Accident and Emergency Units (30%), people misusing the NHS (26%), shortages of beds in hospitals (24%), money being wasted (23%) and social care for the elderly (19%)
- Lower priority concerns were around the **standard of care**, suggesting people are – in relative terms – more satisfied in this regard. The standard of care in your local hospital was cited in the top three concerns by 11%, standard of care from your GP by 11%, and cleanliness and hygiene in the NHS by 8%. Pay for frontline NHS staff was also a lower priority at 10%, and the distance to the nearest hospital was the least urgent worry, at 5%
- There are some demographic differences worth noting:
 - Conservative voters are more likely to choose “money being wasted” as a top concern (32% compared to 23% for all), and “people misusing the NHS” (37% compared to 26%). For Conservative voters, **misuse of the NHS is actually their top concern**
 - People who have used A&E in the last year are **much more likely to cite shortages of doctors and nurses** than other groups (49% compared to 42% overall)
 - Women are more concerned than men about the **waiting times** between diagnosis and treatment (41% of women put this in their top three concerns compared to 32% of men). Other concerns do not exhibit a significant gender gap
 - Younger people are more concerned by **shortages of doctors and nurses**, while older people tend to be more concerned about **A&E pressures, money being wasted, and social care for the elderly**
 - Though still low down in relation to other concerns, younger people are more likely to cite standard of care from GPs and local hospitals as a concern than older people
 - People in AB professions are much more concerned about **shortages of nurses and doctors** (49%) than average (42%) or lower social grades (C2 37%, DE 39%)
 - **Misuse of the NHS and waste** come through strongly for C2 voters – **a key demographic group that swung to the Conservatives at the 2019 General Election**. They are much more likely to rank misuse of the NHS highly (36% to 26% overall), as well as money being wasted (26% to 23% overall)
 - For C2 voters, **misuse is their second biggest concern overall**

Table 2: Thinking about the following aspects of the NHS, which are you most worried about? % naming issue as one of their top three concerns; C2 people compared to all respondents

Issue	All respondents	C2
Shortages of nurses and doctors	42%	37%
Waiting times between being diagnosed and being treated	37%	35%
Getting a GP appointment quickly enough	31%	27%
Pressures on Accident and Emergency units	30%	25%
People misusing the NHS	26%	36%
Shortages of beds in hospitals	24%	25%
Money being wasted	23%	26%
Social care for the elderly	19%	19%
The standard of care in your local hospital	11%	11%
The standard of care from your GP	11%	11%
Pay for frontline NHS staff	10%	9%
Cleanliness and hygiene in the NHS	8%	10%
The distance to the nearest hospital	5%	6%
None of these	3%	2%
Don't know	4%	5%

- There are also some regional variations, with people in the North and Midlands – again key battlegrounds in the recent General Election – **prioritising staff shortages more than others**. For example, in the North the top concern was shortages of doctors and nurses (45%) as well as in the Midlands (39%), but in London the top issue was waiting times (44%) as it was in the South (42%)

2. The public's main funding priorities for the NHS

- **More doctors and nurses are the public's top priority for the government to spend more money on.** Mirroring their concerns, 61% of the public choose more doctors and nurses as a top three area for where they think the government should prioritise for more funding.
- Other top concerns include reducing waiting times for treatment (43%), processes to make the NHS more efficient and reduce waste (34%), mental health services (25%), social care for the elderly (23%), pay for frontline NHS staff (21%), new hospitals and hospital upgrades (21%). In terms of order of priority, **reducing waste** is the third most cited area for more funding, and ranks higher than it does when people are asked about their biggest concerns

- When asked for their number one priority, people choose **more doctors and nurses** (31%), followed by **reducing waste** (15%), then reducing **waiting times** (13%). Again, reducing waste and finding efficiencies is more prominent
- Lower down people's funding priorities are new equipment and technology (11%) putting it in their top three, new medicines and medical devices (8%), preventative services such as stopping smoking (5%), improving patient safety (5%), and more managers and non-clinical staff (1%). Far from showing new technologies are not important, this shows that if new technologies were linked to reducing waste and inefficiency, this would resonate more

Table 3: The government has to make decisions on how to spend money on the NHS. Which aspects of the NHS do you think the government should prioritise for more funding?

Issue	% naming issue as one of their top three priorities	% naming issue as their top priority
More doctors and nurses	61%	31%
Reducing waiting times for treatment	43%	13%
Processes to make the NHS more efficient and reduce waste	34%	15%
Mental health services	25%	8%
Social care for the elderly	23%	6%
Pay for frontline NHS staff	21%	6%
New hospitals and hospital upgrades	21%	3%
Cancer services	15%	4%
New equipment and technology	11%	2%
New medicines and medical devices	8%	1%
Preventative services such as stopping smoking	5%	1%
Improving patient safety	5%	1%
More managers and nonclinical staff	1%	0%
None of these	2%	2%
Don't know	7%	7%

- In terms of demographics:
 - **Demographic differences over staff shortages are less marked** when it comes to asking about funding priorities. Though there were differences in terms of age when asked how big a concern it was for people, there is more unity on

where more funding should go in this regard – for example, 65% of 25-34 year olds put more doctors and nurses in their top three, as do 65% of over-65s. The same applies to regions, with 60% opting for more doctors and nurses in the North, 62% in the Midlands and London, and 63% in the South

- There is also **no gender gap on waiting times** when it comes to funding, with 42% of men and 43% putting it in their top three priorities for more money
- **Waste** comes through more strongly again for Conservative voters, with 49% putting reducing waste and improving efficiency in their top three compared to 34% amongst all respondents. The same also applies to older people. People in the Midlands are particularly keen to see waste reduction prioritised for funding, with 43% putting it in their top three
- Younger people prioritise **mental health** more than older people, as do women – 32% of females said it should be a top three funding priority, compared to 18% of men. Older people were also keener to have more money go to social care

3. Responsibility for the NHS

- **The government is overwhelmingly seen as ultimately responsible for the NHS.** Asked to choose who was ultimately responsible for the National Health Service, 71% chose the government, followed by 8% the chief executive of the NHS, 6% local NHS trusts, 6% the people who use it, and 1% frontline staff
- This applied across **all demographic groups and people regardless of their position on the political spectrum**

Appendix – survey questions

General Election 2019 vote: How did you vote in the General Election on Thursday?

RANDOMISE

- Conservative
- Labour
- Liberal Democrat
- Brexit Party
- Plaid Cymru (Wales only)
- SNP (Scotland only)
- Another party
- Don't know
- I didn't vote
- Rather not say

NHS use: Which of the following health services have you personally used in the last six months as an NHS patient?

RANDOMISE

- Visited my GP
- NHS 111
- NHS Drop-In clinic
- Accident and Emergency (A&E)
- Outpatient appointment at a hospital which did not require a bed
- Day surgery at a hospital which required a bed
- Treatment or surgery requiring an overnight stay at a hospital
- Treatment delivered to you in your own home
- Treatment given outside of a hospital
- Another service
- None
- Don't know

NHS perceived problems: Thinking about the following aspects of the NHS, which are you most worried about? Please choose up to three in order of importance.

RANDOMISE

- Getting a GP appointment quickly enough
- Waiting times between being diagnosed and being treated
- Shortages of nurses and doctors
- Money being wasted
- Pay for frontline NHS staff
- Cleanliness and hygiene in the NHS
- Pressures on Accident and Emergency units
- The standard of care from your GP
- The standard of care in your local hospital
- Shortages of beds in hospitals
- The distance to the nearest hospital

- People misusing the NHS
- Social care for the elderly
- None of the above
- Don't know

NHS funding: The government has to make decisions on how to spend money on the NHS. Which aspects of the NHS do you think the government should prioritise for more funding? Please choose up to three in order of importance.

RANDOMISE

- New hospitals and hospital upgrades
- Social care for the elderly
- Reducing waiting times for treatment
- Processes to make the NHS more efficient and reduce waste
- New equipment and technology
- New medicines and medical devices
- Pay for frontline NHS staff
- More doctors and nurses
- More managers and non-clinical staff
- Improving patient safety
- Mental health services
- Cancer services
- Preventative services such as stopping smoking
- None of the above
- Don't know

Responsibility: Who is ultimately responsible for the NHS?

RANDOMISE

- The Government
- The chief executive of the NHS
- Local NHS trusts
- The people who use it
- Frontline staff
- None of these
- Don't know



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