

Betting the House on Health

Can Boris Johnson win public trust when it comes to running the NHS?

When Boris Johnson entered Downing Street in late July, few anticipated the NHS would become one of his priorities. There was a perception that Johnson would see the NHS as a 'ticked box', following Theresa May's five year settlement and the subsequent NHS Long Term Plan.

This was clearly not the case. Johnson and his advisers attempted to shift attention away from Brexit by placing the NHS (alongside other domestic policies, including policing) at the forefront of his agenda. The prospect of general election campaign may have been a key motive: polling over the past two elections found that the health service is the defining domestic policy issue for voters.^{1,2}

But is this strategy proving successful? MHP wanted to understand how the recent funding announcements landed with the public both in terms of resulting media coverage and online conversations. Our poll also explored whether voters 'trusted' Boris Johnson when it comes to leading the best Government for the NHS. Finally, we've explored the extent to which Labour has seized momentum on the NHS debate following their own Party Conference in Brighton.

We hope you enjoy digesting the findings!



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METHODOLOGY

1 ComRes interviewed 1,741 adults in England between 13th and 16th September to understand their views on recent NHS announcements

2 MHP used a range of media monitoring and analysis tools to analyse how funding announcements had been reported

3 An additional poll was undertaken with 2,045 British adults between 25th and 26th September, specifically in relation to NHS policy commitments made during Labour Party Conference in Brighton

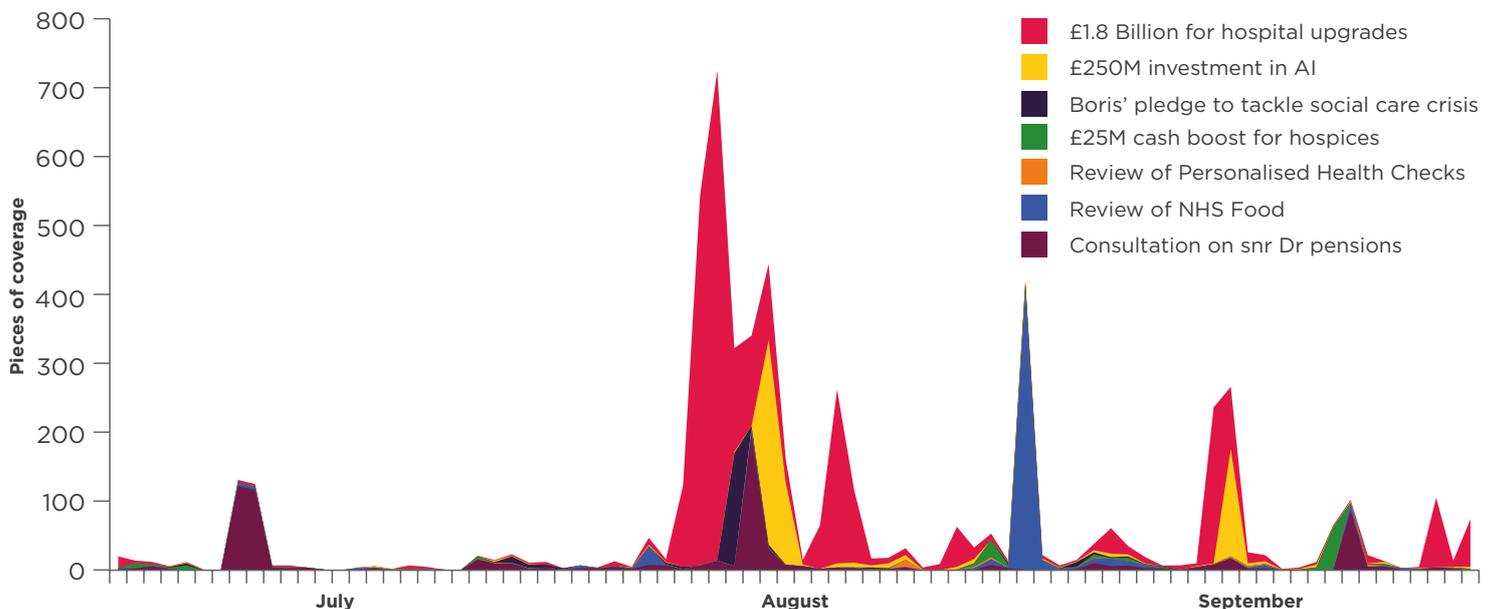
BRIEFING:

DO THE PUBLIC SUPPORT THE RECENT FUNDING ANNOUNCEMENTS, AND HOW HAVE THEY BEEN REPORTED IN THE MEDIA?

Our results show that:

The public has not felt the additional spending. Just one in four (24%) think that the NHS is better funded now than before the EU referendum. Nearly double that number (44%) disagreed with the statement.

Of the announcements made since Johnson became Prime Minister, the **£1.8bn of funding for in hospital improvements** has received the best public response, with two fifths (43%) considering it the most important announcement. This was reflected in media coverage, with the capital spending commitment occupying 80% of the online news shared of all seven announcements. (see figure)



TRUSTED TO RUN THE NHS?

When it comes to who is most trusted, Corbyn and Johnson are neck and neck (21% and 19% respectively). The parity between the parties is really striking. Labour should, and have historically, been a long way ahead with their stewardship of the NHS being one of their strongest electoral assets.

More worryingly, 'none of the above' (when taking into account other main party leaders) was the clear favourite, with 25% of the vote.

Announcement	Cancer	Mental health	Heart disease and stroke	Obesity and diabetes	Alzheimer's disease and dementia	Asthma and respiratory conditions
Percentage of public who think highest importance	37%	22%	7%	32%	16%	2%

And what about disease priorities?

37% of the public still think cancer should be the priority in the next general election. This contrasts to MHP Health's research in December 2018, which found that MPs were more likely to call for mental health and action on obesity and diabetes. Respiratory conditions still struggle to feature.

UNDER THE SPOTLIGHT: LABOUR'S PHARMACEUTICAL PROPOSALS

Jeremy Corbyn's leader speech in Brighton revealed some radical policies relating to NHS funding and medicines access.

Our second poll assessed which of these resonated with the electorate.

	NET: Support (%)	NET: Oppose (%)	Don't Know (%)
5,000 additional GPs trained per year	91%	2%	6%
New measures that regulate pharmaceutical companies to lower the cost of medicines to the NHS	86%	6%	8%
Staff bursaries for 24,000 more nurses and midwives	84%	5%	11%
Planting one million more trees on the NHS estate	71%	13%	16%
Removing prescription charges in England, as in Scotland and Wales	69%	21%	11%

Despite securing the lowest level of support in our public poll, the move to ban prescription charges, and in doing so move England into line with Scotland and Wales is smart in several ways: it is easily understood, can be implemented quickly, and the total annual cost – around £740 million a year – is manageable. Other 'retail' policies made ahead of general elections often come with a bigger price tag.

Whilst our polling reveals that almost all the policies command a high level of public support, Labour's plans for medicines regulation represents the biggest departure from current policy.

Among the headline proposals are plans to use Crown Licensing and patent law to secure access to medicines without Industry negotiations, introducing Government directives to channel investment into specific therapy areas or conditions, and increasing public control of the pharmaceutical supply chain. Jeremy Corbyn also re-affirmed that if elected Prime Minister he would establish a UK Government-run drug manufacturing and development centre.

Our polling finds a high level of support for these proposals. Among the key findings:

Net Support level (total public)

Policy

46%	Legislating to prevent former Government officials from working in the pharmaceutical industry
58%	Removing the market incentive that grants exclusive rights if medicines are brought to market quickly
68%	Establishing a UK Government-run medicines development and manufacturing company
69%	Using Crown Licensing to remove exclusive rights for medicines marketing
76%	Additional oversight from Government over research funding

•Significantly, the policies command a high **degree of support from non-Labour voters**

•61 percent of Conservative voters were in favour of using **Crown Licensing rules to overrule patents**, whereas 57% of Conservative voters supported establishing a Government-run medicines manufacturing company

In an era of 'blink and you miss it' politics it's no surprise that the announcement was overshadowed by the macropolitical crisis over Brexit. But make no mistake: this is an enormous shift in policy terms from the Labour Party – and could bring medicines pricing and access to the surface as one of the key issues in the looming general election.

MHP would be happy to discuss how we can support your organisation prepare for the possible general election. If you would like to discuss in more detail, please do get in touch at health@mhpc.com, or on 020 3128 8100.

References

- ¹ BBC News. 2015. NHS 'most important issue' suggests BBC/Populus poll.
² GP Online. 2017. Public concern about NHS hits 15-year high ahead of general election.