

Prevention over Cure?

Political attitudes to prevention in the NHS Long Term Plan



About WA Health

WA Health combines specialist insight with imaginative solutions to tackle the major issues in healthcare today. We excel at targeted campaigns that make sure our clients influence the agenda, nationally and locally.

With backgrounds in politics, charities, journalism, patient groups and industry, our consultants have the breadth of expertise to create innovative public affairs and communications strategies in a complex, ever-changing healthcare environment.



Findings at a glance



64%

of MPs believe the NHS should **direct more resources towards prevention**, rather than increasing funding for new treatments

43%

of MPs stated that they would not be concerned that their constituents will receive a **poorer quality of treatment** if the NHS shifts too much resource towards prevention

49%

are confident that the **NHS Long Term Plan will be successful** in improving the prevention of ill health and disease



27%

of MPs view predictive prevention such as **genomic testing** as one of their top three priorities for prevention policy

79%

think the **pharmaceutical sector has a legitimate role** in implementing the NHS's prevention agenda

Prevention over cure?

The politics of prevention

‘Doing more’ on prevention has widespread support among health stakeholders and politicians. Putting greater emphasis on early intervention to lessen the prevalence of many of the biggest diseases, including cancer, heart disease and diabetes, is hard to disagree with.

The focus on prevention within the NHS Long Term Plan represents a further shift in the UK’s approach to health policy. In many ways, it is the culmination of Simon Stevens’ five-year project to refocus the NHS towards keeping people well to help reduce the burden on healthcare services. In the current Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, he has clearly found a kindred spirit.

While the publication of the NHS Long Term Plan echoes the mood music of recent years, Matt Hancock himself has started to shift the tone. Since taking office last July, Hancock has pitched prevention as an alternative to medicine. As something that will help the UK better manage and potentially reduce spending on treatment. In doing so, he has started to invoke a new political language around prevention that puts it at odds with spending on pharmaceutical products.

This presents a potential challenge for the UK’s life sciences sector, for the first time making the case that prevention is *better* than cure.

“Less pills and Prozac, more perspiration,” says the Health Secretary, who has praised initiatives such as social prescribing that “don’t rely on multi-million-pound marketing budgets because they are free social cures.” New initiatives such as ‘Rethinking medicines,’ set out in the NHS’s Personalised Care Plan, and the Prevention Green Paper due to be published in the coming months are likely to push the agenda further.

Of course, such a binary choice is not accurate. The pharmaceutical industry often plays a critical role in preventing or managing the escalation of disease as well as providing treatment for diseases that cannot be prevented.

The NHS remains one of the hottest political issues, which now makes shifting focus from treatment to prevention political. While politicians don’t control spending decisions on treatments, prevention or health services, mood music matters. As political language shifts, understanding the political implications will be important.

WA Health set out to discover if MPs share the Health Secretary’s view that ‘prevention is better than cure’. To do this, we commissioned YouGov to poll 100 cross-party MPs immediately following the publication of the NHS Long Term Plan. The findings will give the life sciences sector both food for thought and ideas for next steps.

Resourcing the prevention agenda



64%

of MPs believe the NHS should **direct more resources towards prevention**, rather than increasing funding for new treatments

- Hancock's message is getting cut-through in Parliament with both Labour and Conservative MPs. The majority of MPs would be quite comfortable seeing new treatments delayed and de-prioritised in favour of prevention.
- Almost one in five MPs surveyed (19 per cent) strongly agreed with this statement.
- Conservative MPs surveyed were more likely to agree with the statement – 69 per cent compared to the overall average of 64 per cent.
- The London MPs surveyed are far less keen on shifting resources to prevention, with just 42 per cent of them agreeing that shifting resources from treatment to prevention would improve the nation's health.

It is no secret that spending on healthcare remains a contentious issue. While Simon Stevens and former Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt were successful in securing an extra £20 billion a year for the NHS to 2024, how this funding is spent matters. None of the new money has been earmarked for treatment spend.

Our poll suggests that a majority of MPs would be comfortable with a shift from treatment to prevention. For the life sciences sector, this finding may be concerning. Against the already challenging backdrop of Brexit, and an increasingly tight regulatory and access environment, the leadership of NHS England and the Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC) have been forthright about their desire to reduce

the medicines bill. There is interest in new models to incentivise the most impactful new therapies while reducing access to others – even those that can demonstrate preventative benefits.

There is a potential irony in the fact that public health spending – a prominent existing channel for preventative spend – has been cut heavily over recent years, with the Health Foundation estimating a real term cut of £900 million in public health spend between 2014/15 and 2019/20. There is growing awareness of the impact these cuts are having to services such as smoking cessation or weight-loss programmes, and directing additional resource back into the services appears to be politically popular.

Our polling shows that Matt Hancock might be confident in political support for his prevention-over-cure agenda and publicity for prevention initiatives such as social prescribing – gardening, volunteering or sports classes – has been generally positive. Support is, perhaps unsurprisingly, stronger among his Conservative colleagues.

However, while MPs can back the concept of prevention in theory, when there is a genuine threat of new medicines being delayed or rejected, the political equation can quickly shift. Recent flare-ups between politicians and NHS leaders on one side and patients, families and patient groups who are desperate for innovative new treatments on the other show that politics will always be a factor in healthcare decisions.

Impact on quality of treatment

43%

of MPs stated that they would not be concerned that their constituents will receive a **poorer quality of treatment** if the NHS shifts too much resource towards prevention



-
- When pressed, a very small majority of MPs (46 per cent compared to 43 per cent) state they would be concerned about the impact on treatment quality if the NHS shifted resource too far towards prevention.
 - Newer MPs are far less concerned about the impact on quality of treatment of shifting resource towards prevention than their longer-standing colleagues, with an average of just 34 per cent of MPs first elected in 2015 or 2017 expressing concern, compared to 67 per cent of those elected before 1997.

This question pushes MPs further in considering the impact of resource being shifted from treatment to prevention. Our findings show that MPs of all parties are split roughly half and half as to whether this is a concern or not.

There is perhaps a perception from MPs that more focus on prevention will lead to less need for treatment; indeed this is the message that the Health Secretary is keen to assert. However, in truth, any savings from a focus on prevention are likely to be many years away and long-term gain does not tend to be a strong motivator for politicians elected on a maximum five year cycle.

It is interesting that newer MPs are more comfortable with the potential consequences of the pro-prevention approach than their more established colleagues. Perhaps those who have spent more time on the green benches of the House of Commons are more cynical of the potential for prevention to make a major impact, and therefore more concerned about the potential shift in resource. It may also be that memories of the many high-profile fights over funding for treatment in the 1990s and 2000s are deeply engrained.

For industry, it is worth considering the shift in views between newer and longer serving MPs. If this trend continues, there may be a greater need to demonstrate the vital role of treatments in the full healthcare and prevention spectrum.

Confidence in the Long Term Plan

49%

of MPs are confident that the **NHS Long Term Plan will be successful** in improving the prevention of ill health and disease



-
- There is a healthy degree of both optimism and scepticism over the likely success of shifting to a prevention-focused health system as well as 15 per cent who say they don't know if they are confident or not.
 - Confidence is unsurprisingly split on party lines, with 85 per cent of Conservative MPs expressing confidence against just 11 per cent of Labour MPs.
 - Among those elected before 1997, just 32 per cent are confident the shift will be successful versus 67 per cent of those elected between 2010 and 2014.

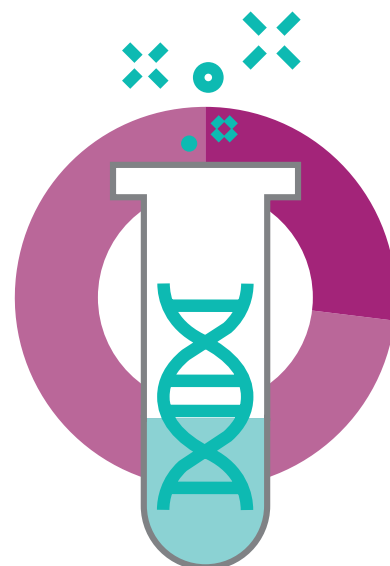
When findings are split so clearly on party lines, it is hard to make too much of the results. What is clear is that despite the Long Term Plan being an NHS England strategy, it remains intrinsically political. It is possible to assume that MPs from the party of government have adopted the Long Term Plan – and the potential benefits it can bring – as their own, whereas opposition MPs are more likely to oppose it even if they may also appear to agree with its overall direction.

The potential scepticism for a shift to prevention being successful among longer standing MPs is also clear. Could this be a case of 'seen it all before'?

Prevention priorities

27%

of MPs view predictive prevention such as **genomic testing** as one of their top three priorities for prevention policy



-
- When asked to select three out of seven named preventative options to prioritise, increasing the availability of predictive prevention such as genomic testing was only selected by just over a quarter of MPs.
 - Four of the seven options received more votes than genomic testing.
 - Tackling obesity through improving diet and increasing physical activity received the most votes, with two in three MPs selecting this option, followed just behind by improving mental health outcomes.
 - Female MPs were much more likely to identify social prescribing options to reduce loneliness and social isolation as a priority, 33 per cent against just 16 per cent of male MPs.
 - 44 per cent of MPs responding to the survey who were elected in 2017 chose engaging with employers to make sure good health and wellbeing are part of the employer's responsibility, compared to just 20 per cent of respondents overall.

The one area that the Government and NHS England has consistently seen a role for the life sciences sector in prevention is in increasing genomic testing to better identify who is most at risk of developing certain disease. However, for almost three quarters of MPs in our survey, this did not rank as a top three priority for them.

This may suggest that MPs do not generally associate prevention with life science innovations. Or it could be that the most common associations politicians have with prevention are around immediate, visible challenges such as tackling obesity and improving mental health outcomes.

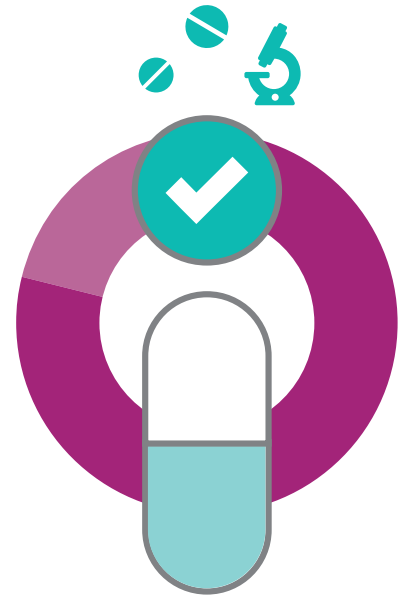
How far the MPs would see the existing and potential role for treatments in this space is not shown through these findings. However, there may be an openness to considering all options, pharmaceutical and otherwise. For example, the third most popular choice is increasing the availability of screening programmes and immunisations to ensure people are protected against disease, giving clear recognition to the importance of vaccines.

Matt Hancock's big push for social prescribing has failed to cut through with the MPs we surveyed, with just 22 per cent selecting this as a top three priority (although the question defined

this as 'Reducing loneliness and social isolation by increasing the availability of community schemes such as gardening or dancing classes' and did not refer specifically to the term 'social prescribing').

Just 11 per cent of respondents who identified as Leave supporters chose this option compared to 25 per cent of their Remain voting colleagues. Conversely, Leave voting MPs were much more likely to choose genomic testing and predictive prevention as a priority, 40 per cent against 21 per cent for Remain.

A role for industry?



79%

think the **pharmaceutical sector has a legitimate role** in implementing the NHS's prevention agenda

-
- Overwhelmingly, MPs from across the House of Commons see the pharmaceutical sector as a partner in achieving the prevention ambition.
 - MPs from London were the most in agreement at 91 per cent, but surprisingly this drops to 74 per cent of MPs representing seats in the life sciences heartlands of the East, South East and South West of England.
 - Nearly one in seven (15 per cent) Labour MPs do not think the sector has a legitimate role.
 - MPs first elected in 2017 are least likely to recognise the legitimate role with just 71 per cent agreeing, compared to 100 per cent of those elected pre-1997.

There is a silver lining for pharma: MPs generally believe that the sector does have a role to play in delivering on the prevention agenda. This is an important message for both the Health Secretary and NHS England, who have at times not given industry as much opportunity to shape the agenda as may be helpful.

What next?

The NHS Long Term Plan is just the beginning of the attempted shift towards prevention. Over the coming months individual implementation plans for specific parts of the plan will be published, alongside the *Prevention is Better than Cure* Green Paper.

The next few months will therefore be critical for the pharmaceutical sector to refine its position around the crucial role it has to play in both the agendas of prevention and 'cure' (or disease management at least). A nuanced and considerate approach will be important, recognising the political realities as well as the passions of those leading the health service.

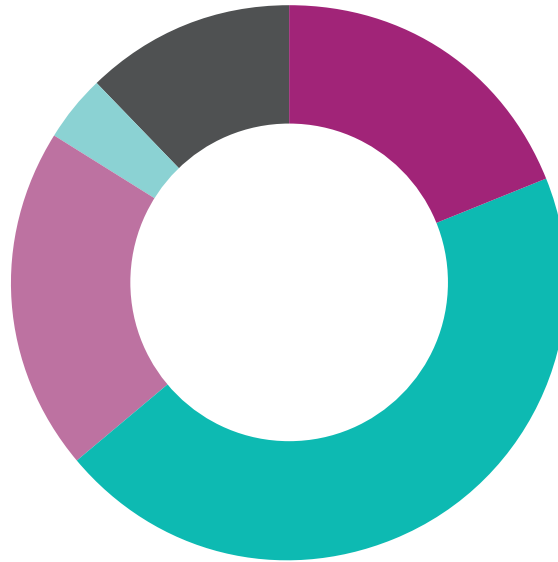
As always, politicians are an important audience – shaping as well as responding to the health policy mood music. As the life sciences sector faces some of its toughest challenges in the UK market, there is much work to do.

Findings

100 MPs were asked to what extent they agree or disagree with the following statements:

Fig. 1

To improve the nation's health, the NHS should shift resources towards prevention, rather than increasing its funding for treatments



- Strongly agree 19%
- Tend to agree 45%
- Tend to disagree 20%
- Strongly disagree 4%
- Don't know 12%

Fig. 2

I'm confident the NHS Long Term Plan will be successful in improving the prevention of ill health and disease



- Strongly agree 10%
- Tend to agree 39%
- Tend to disagree 21%
- Strongly disagree 15%
- Don't know 15%

Fig. 3

If the NHS shifts too much resource towards prevention, I would be concerned that my constituents will receive a poorer quality of treatment

- Strongly agree 6%
- Tend to agree 40%
- Tend to disagree 34%
- Strongly disagree 9%
- Don't know 11%

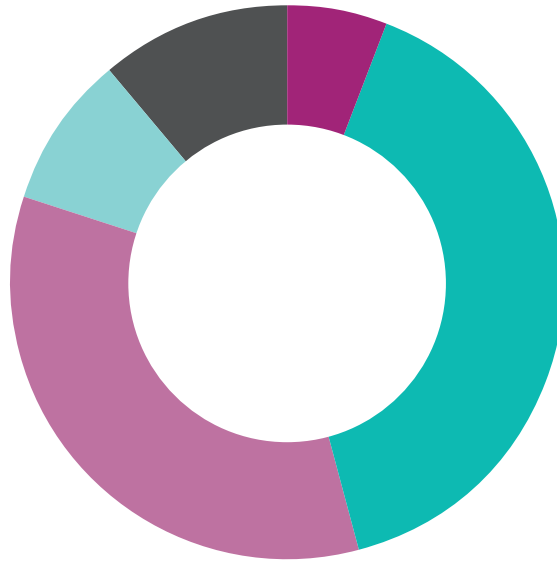


Fig. 4

The pharmaceutical industry has a legitimate role in implementing the NHS's prevention agenda

- Strongly agree 16%
- Tend to agree 63%
- Tend to disagree 9%
- Strongly disagree 1%
- Don't know 12%

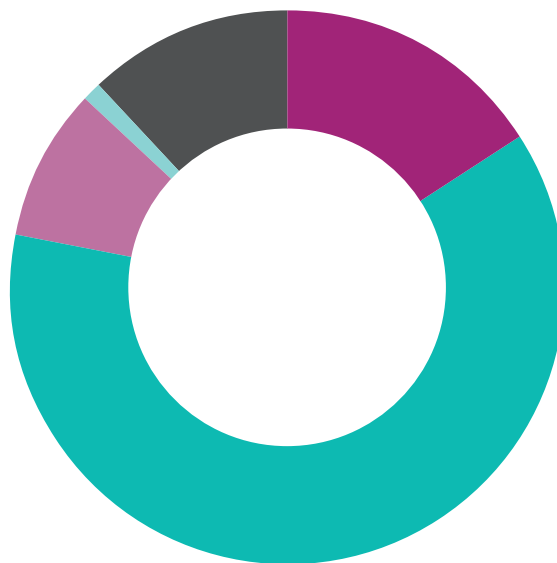


Fig. 5

Which of the following three things, if any, do you think should be the main focus for the NHS when it comes to prevention?





We are passionate about improving patient care and outcomes through deep insights, targeted strategies and powerful communications.

To discuss our services and how we can help you, please contact:

Caroline Gordon

Director, WA Health

Carolinegordon@wacomms.co.uk

07931 862 631

[@WA_Comms](#)

wacomms.co.uk



