

The NHS and public health: perceptions vs reality

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Introduction

This report presents findings from an online survey of 2,056 English adults, conducted 26 November–1 December 2020. This period coincided with the second national lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and this context should be taken into account when reading the findings presented here.

People in England have an overwhelmingly positive view of the NHS. There is almost universal agreement (84%) that the health service is one of the best in the world, and the public have a hugely favourable opinion of the care that they and their family have access to.

But at the same time as holding very positive views of the health service and how it is managed, **a significant majority (61%) also believe that the NHS wastes money.** There is also **an overly negative perception of the service the NHS provides and how it is run.** For example, the average guess is that 52% of people wait at least 18 weeks for hospital treatment, when the reality is 17%

But not all of the public's misperceptions are overly negative. The public believe that life expectancy in the UK compares more favourably to other OECD nations than it does in reality (average guess 16/35; reality 23/35) and people think GP numbers have grown when they have actually reduced.

The public have accurate perceptions about some NHS and population health indicators. A majority also correctly identify that NHS output has increased in recent years, and they have a **realistic view of where the UK ranks on healthcare spending compared with other OECD nations.**

On health indicators in the UK, **the public rightly recognise that life expectancy has increased over the past decade or so,** and they come close in their guess of how long an average man can expect to live in good health.

The majority of people in England are optimistic about the quality of care they will receive through the NHS in the coming years, and more people believe the health service will exist in its current form in 2050 than do not. 18-24-year-olds are by far the most optimistic on both counts.

But one in 10 think it will not survive no matter how much extra investment it receives, and a majority believe that the health service will only survive with a significant increase in funding.

How the public view the NHS

People in England have an overwhelmingly positive view of the NHS. There is almost universal agreement that the health service is one of the best in the world, and the public have a hugely favourable opinion of the care that they and their family have access to.

There is also a high level of satisfaction with how the NHS is run, and just under half the population say they have become more satisfied since the start of the coronavirus crisis.

The public also accurately guess how satisfied people are with the NHS: there is widespread understanding that it is highly rated. But people think the Covid-19 crisis has changed views more than it really has: for example, people guess that 35% of the public have become less satisfied with the NHS during the pandemic, when only 13% actually have.

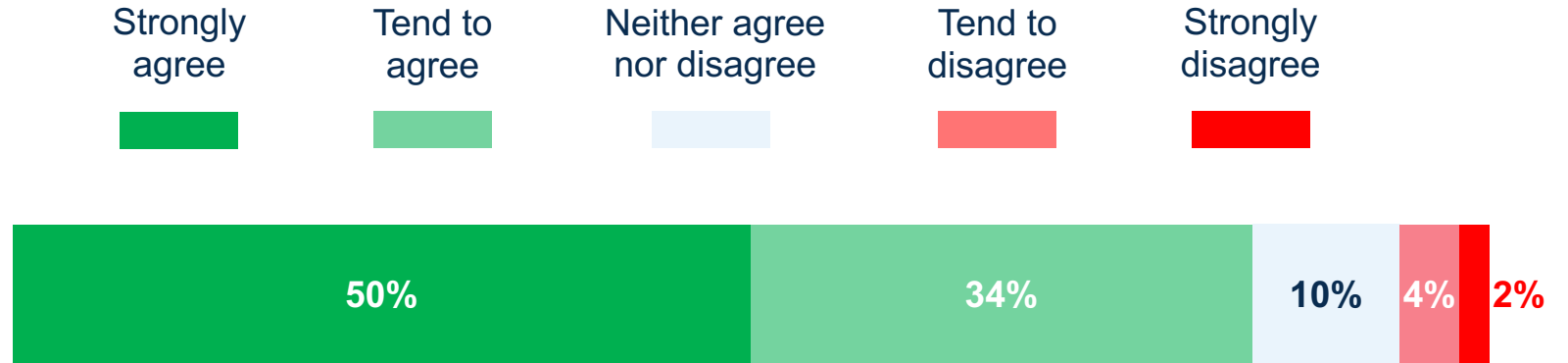
But at the same time as holding very positive views of the health service and how it is managed, a significant majority also believe that the NHS wastes money.

The vast majority of people in England – 84% – agree that the NHS is one of the best health systems in the world, with 50% strongly agreeing. 6% disagree.

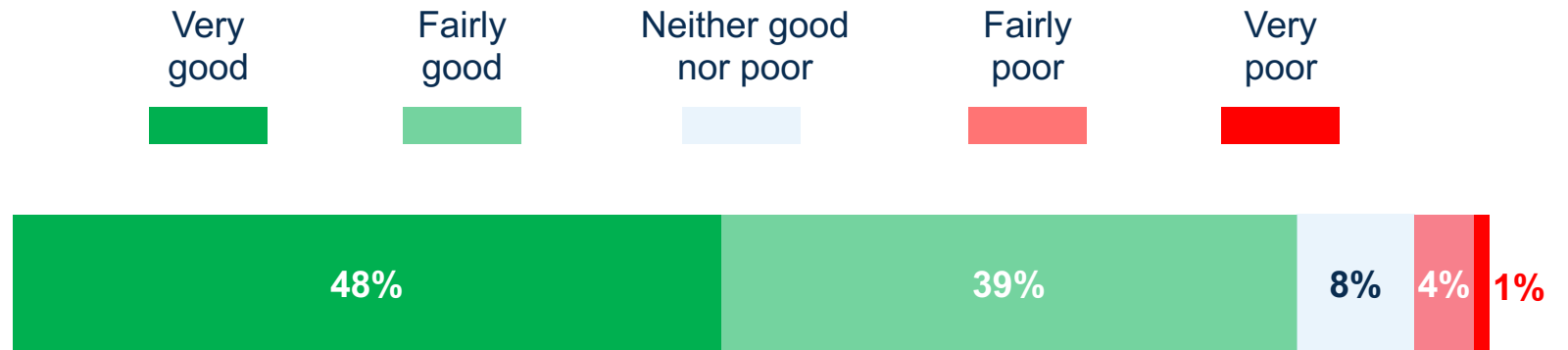
And 87% give a positive rating to the NHS healthcare that they and their family have access to: 48% rate it as very good and 39% as fairly good. 5% rate it as poor.

Despite – or perhaps because of – the pandemic, these results are more positive than when similar questions have been asked historically. In 2013, 67% of British respondents rated the quality of health care they had access to as very or fairly good.

To what extent, if at all, do you agree or disagree that Britain’s National Health Service is one of the best in the world?



How would you rate the quality of the NHS healthcare that you and your family have access to?

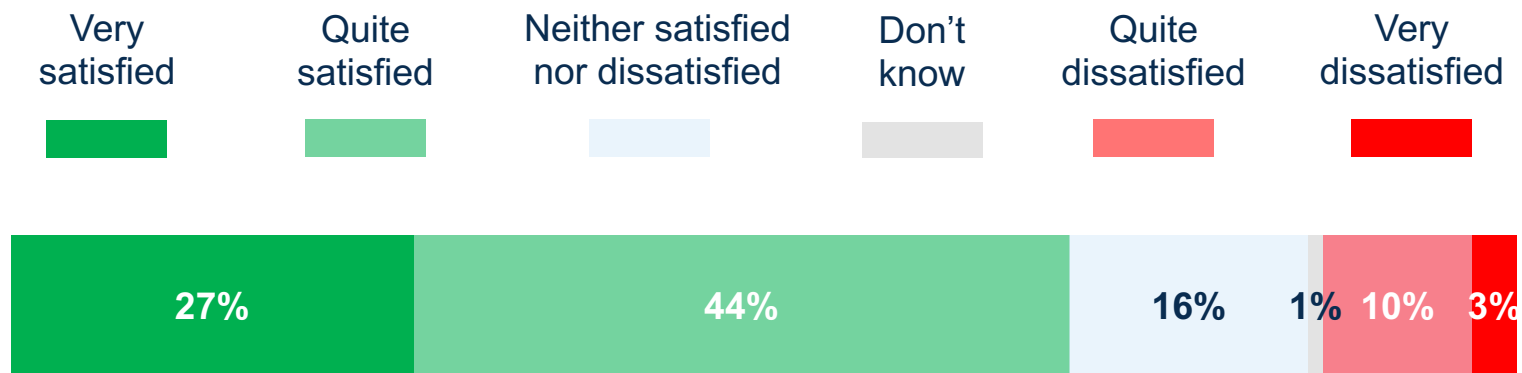


71% say they're satisfied with the running of the NHS, while 13% say they're dissatisfied.

This is much more positive than the most recent (2019) British Social Attitudes Survey, which found 60% were satisfied with the running of the NHS. The difference may reflect a change in attitudes driven by the Covid-19 pandemic.

And the English public have an accurate view of satisfaction levels among the country. Their average guess is that 65% of people are very or quite satisfied with the way the NHS is run.

All in all, how satisfied would you say you are with the way in which the NHS is run?



Out of 100 people in England, how many would say they are “very satisfied” or “quite satisfied” with the way the NHS is run?



44% say they've become more satisfied with the running of the NHS as a result of the coronavirus crisis.

A similar proportion – 41% – report that their satisfaction is unchanged, while 14% say they have become more dissatisfied.

The public misperceive levels of satisfaction with how the NHS is run since the start of the pandemic, overestimating the change in both positive and negative sentiment.

For example, their average guess is that 61% of people have become more satisfied with it, when the true proportion is 44%. And they estimate that dissatisfaction is three times as high it actually is (35% vs 13%).

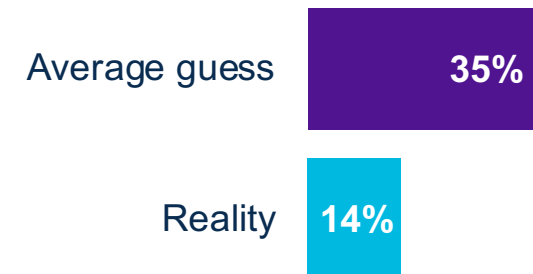
Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, has there been a change in how satisfied you are with the way the NHS is run?



Out of 100 people in England, how many would say they have become **“much more satisfied”** or **“a bit more satisfied”** with the way the NHS is run since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic?



Out of 100 people in England, how many would say they have become **“much less satisfied”** or **“a bit less satisfied”** with the way the NHS is run since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic?

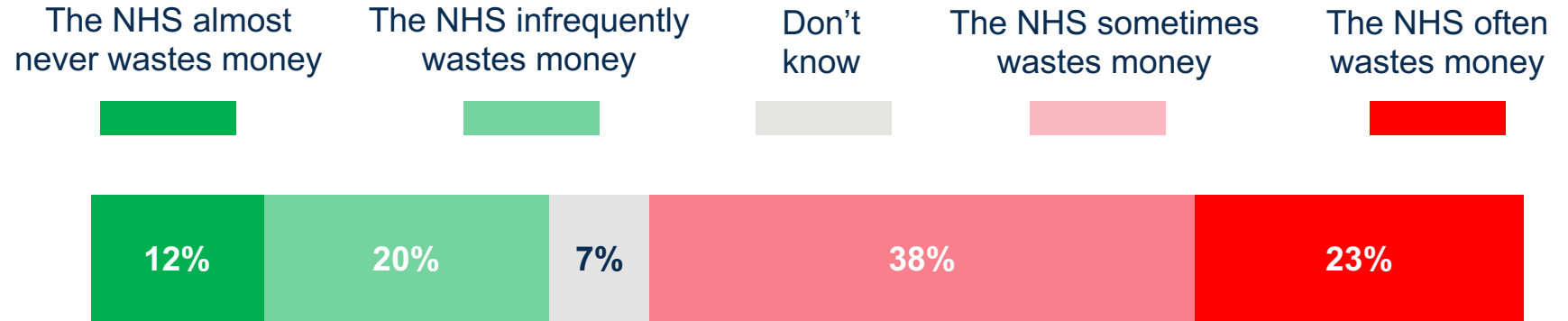


Despite the public's overwhelmingly favourable views of the NHS, a significant majority – 61% – think that the health service wastes money, with a quarter believing it does so often.

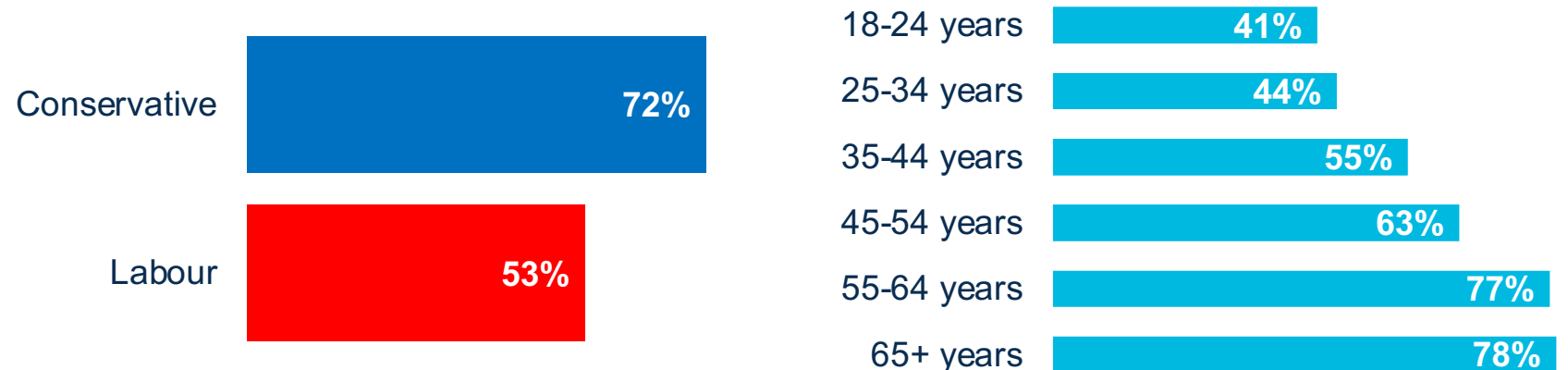
2019 Lib Dem (76%) and Conservative (72%) voters are much more likely than Labour voters to think money is wasted in the NHS.

And older people are more more likely than younger people to hold this view.

Thinking about the NHS as a whole, which of the following statements best reflects your views on the ways the NHS uses money?



% who say the NHS wastes money, by political affiliation and age



Perceptions vs reality: what the public get **wrong** about the state of the NHS and the health of the nation

Despite the very positive views of the NHS as a whole, across several measures, people in England believe the NHS is performing more poorly than it is. On average, they guess that patients wait much longer than they actually do for hospital treatment and to be dealt with by Emergency Departments. They also significantly overestimate the number of staff vacancies and think that nursing levels are worse than they really are.

But not all of the public's misperceptions are overly negative: people think GP numbers have grown more than they actually have, and they are much more likely to incorrectly believe hospital bed capacity has increased rather than decreased.

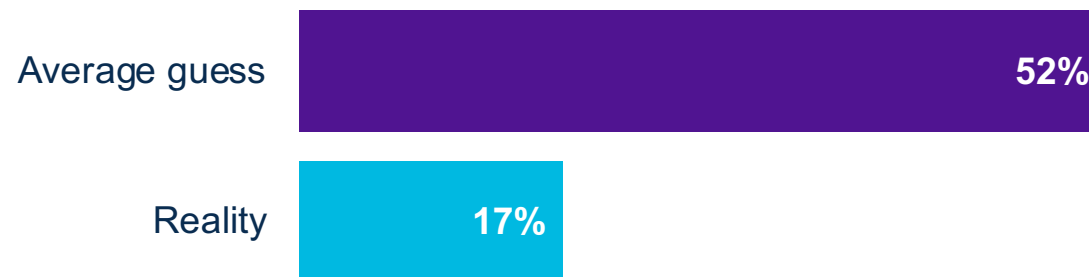
The public are also wrong on the extent of private sector provision in the health service, believing it is much more widespread than it is in reality, and they overestimate the proportion of foreign-born workers in the NHS.

On the health of the nation, the public tend to believe that some trends are worse than they actually are – for example, overestimating the proportion of people who smoke in England. But despite this excessively gloomy view, the public still mistakenly believe that life expectancy in the UK compares more favourably to other OECD nations than it does in reality.

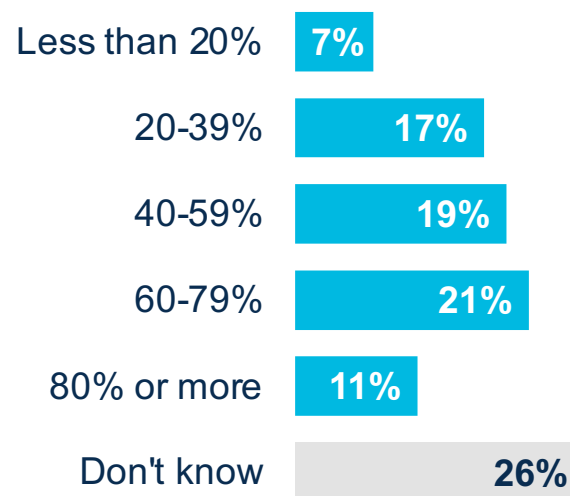
The public hugely overestimate the proportion of people who had to wait longer than 18 weeks for routine hospital treatment in 2019.

They guess that 52% of those who needed such treatment waited this long after being referred by their GP – three times as high as the reality of 17%.¹

In England, what proportion of people who had routine hospital treatment in 2019 do you believe waited more than 18 weeks after being referred to a hospital by their GP?



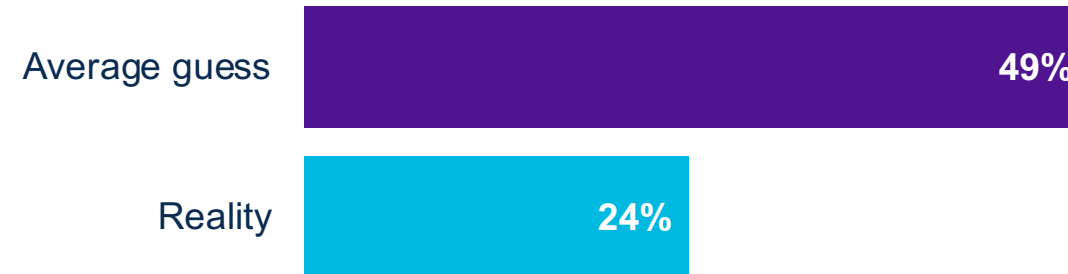
Distribution of guesses



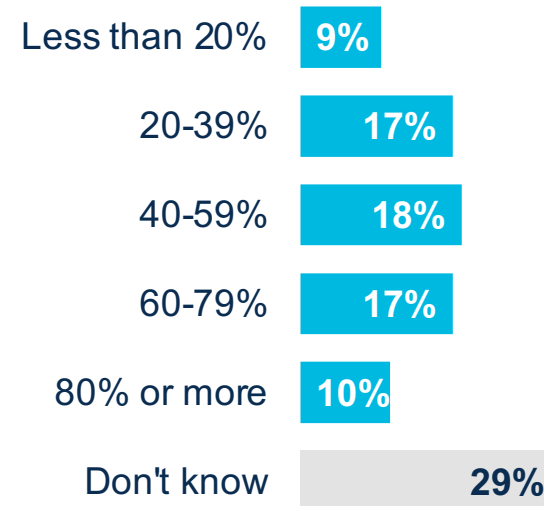
24% of Emergency Department attendees in England take longer than four hours from arrival to admission, transfer, or discharge.²

But the public perception is that half of all attendances take this long to process – more than twice the reality.

In England, what proportion of all Emergency Department attendees do you believe take four hours or longer from arrival to either admission, transfer, or discharge?



Distribution of guesses

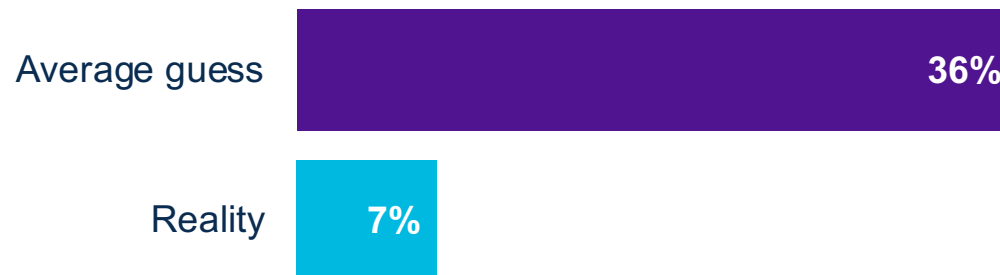


The public's average guess is that 36% of NHS England spending was on private sector providers in 2018 and 2019 – five times the reality, which is 7%.³

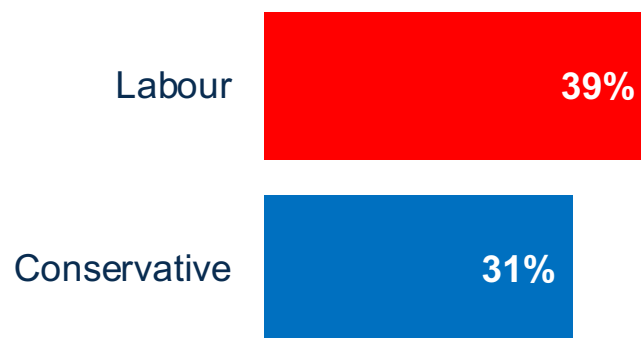
Only 12% of people get close to the correct answer with a guess of under 20% – and just 2% of the public accurately guessed a percentage between 0 and 9%.

Political affiliation appears to have little impact on perceptions of the extent of private sector provision.

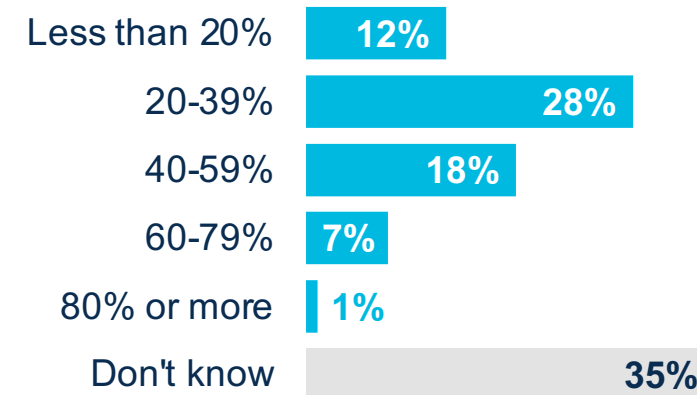
Sometimes the NHS pays private providers to deliver health services, instead of directly providing such services. In 2018 and 2019, what proportion of NHS England spending do you think was on private sector service providers, not including GPs?



Average guess, by 2019 general election vote



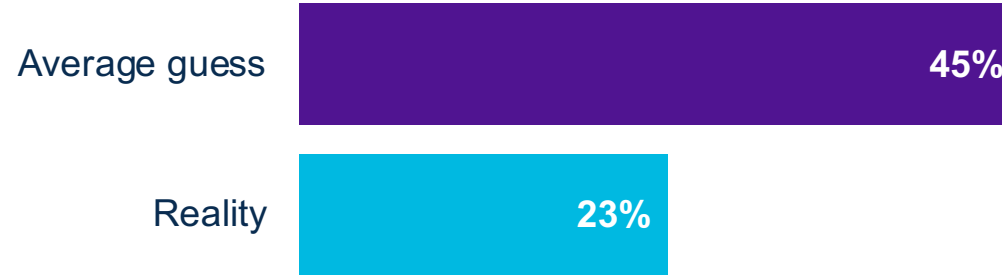
Distribution of guesses



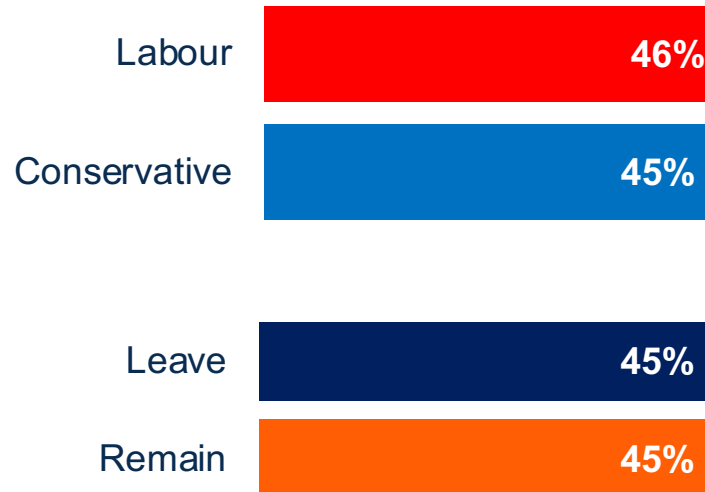
On average, people in England think that 45% of UK NHS staff were born outside the UK – twice as many as the reality of 23%.⁴

This misperception is consistent across voters of all three main political parties and across both sides of the Brexit divide.

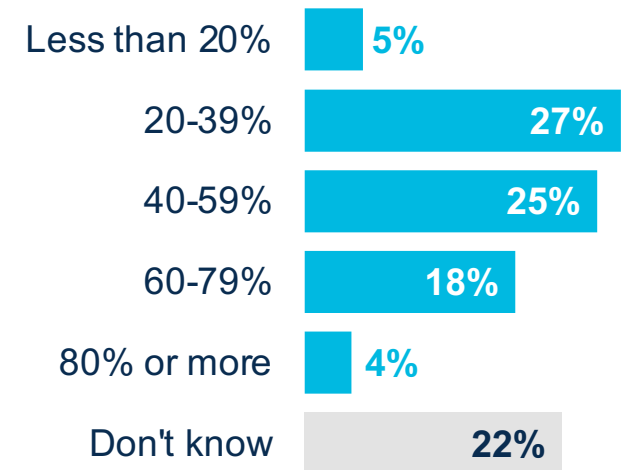
In 2019, what proportion of UK NHS staff do you think were born outside of the UK?



Average guess, by 2019 general election vote and 2016 Brexit vote

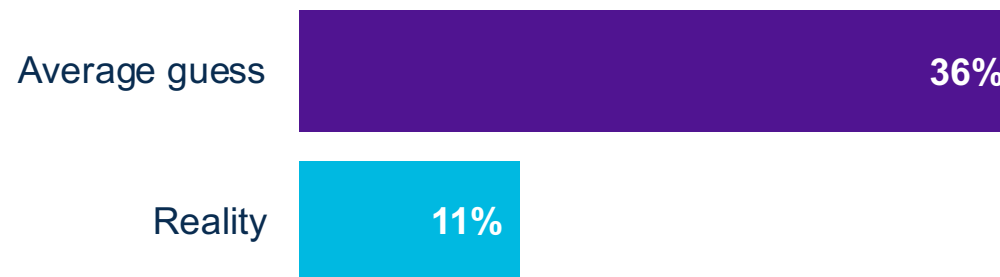


Distribution of guesses

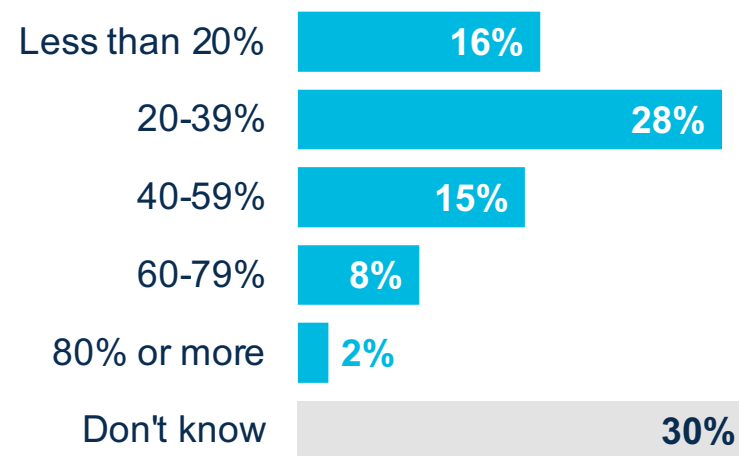


11% of NHS nursing positions in England were vacant in December 2019,⁵ but the public perception is that the situation is much worse – they guess that three times as many positions were unfilled.

What proportion of nursing positions within the NHS in England do you think were vacant in December 2019? A vacancy is defined as a post that is unfilled by permanent or fixed-term staff. Some vacant posts may be filled by agency or temporary staff, but these posts are still considered to be vacancies



Distribution of guesses

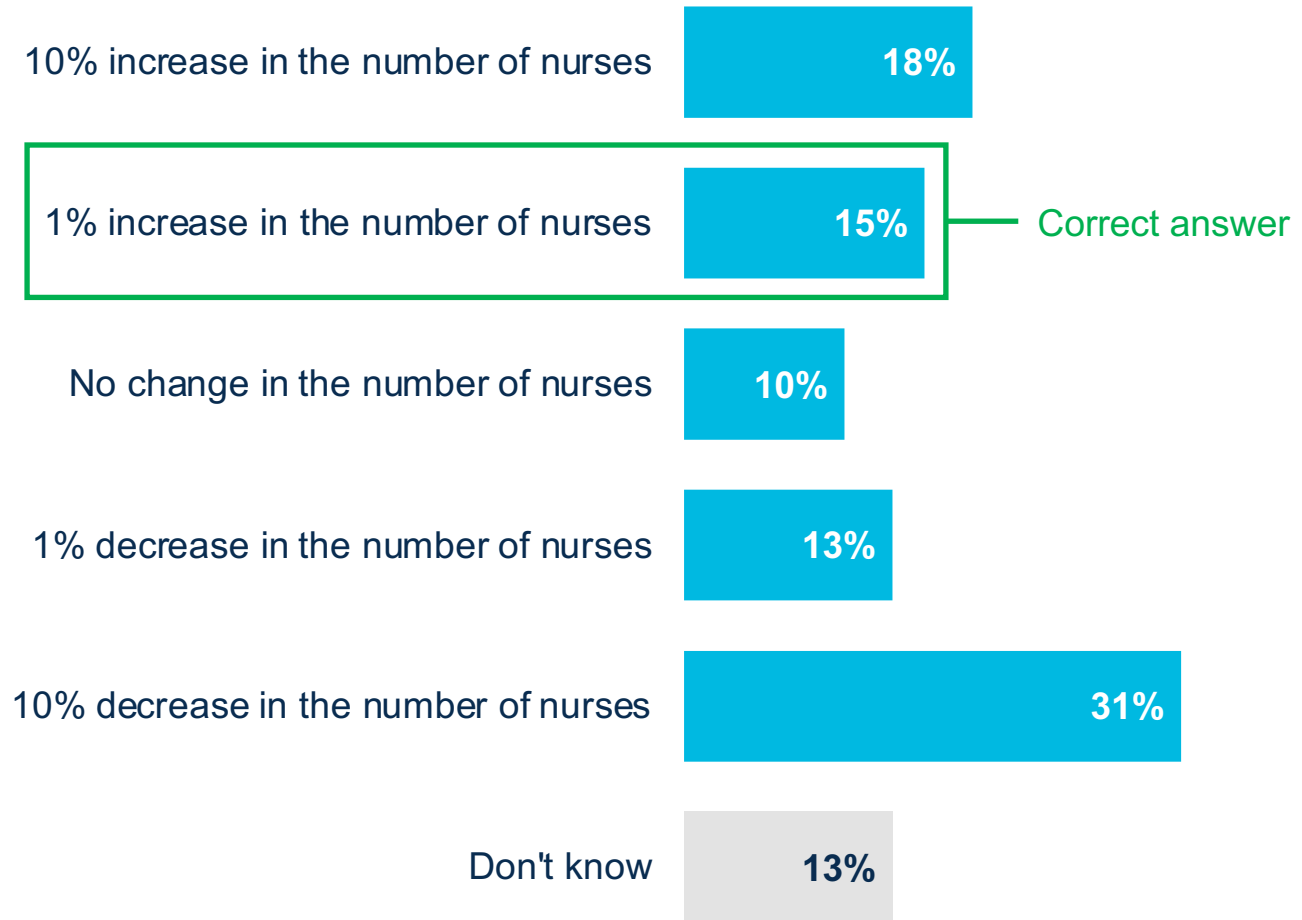


Underlining that people in England have an overly negative perception of the nursing situation in the country, nearly a third think that the numbers of nurses declined by 10% between 2010/11 and 2016/17. In reality, there was a 1% increase in the number of nurses.⁶

This compares with 32% who think the number of nurses has increased, and around one in six people who correctly guess that it has risen by 1%.

Some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

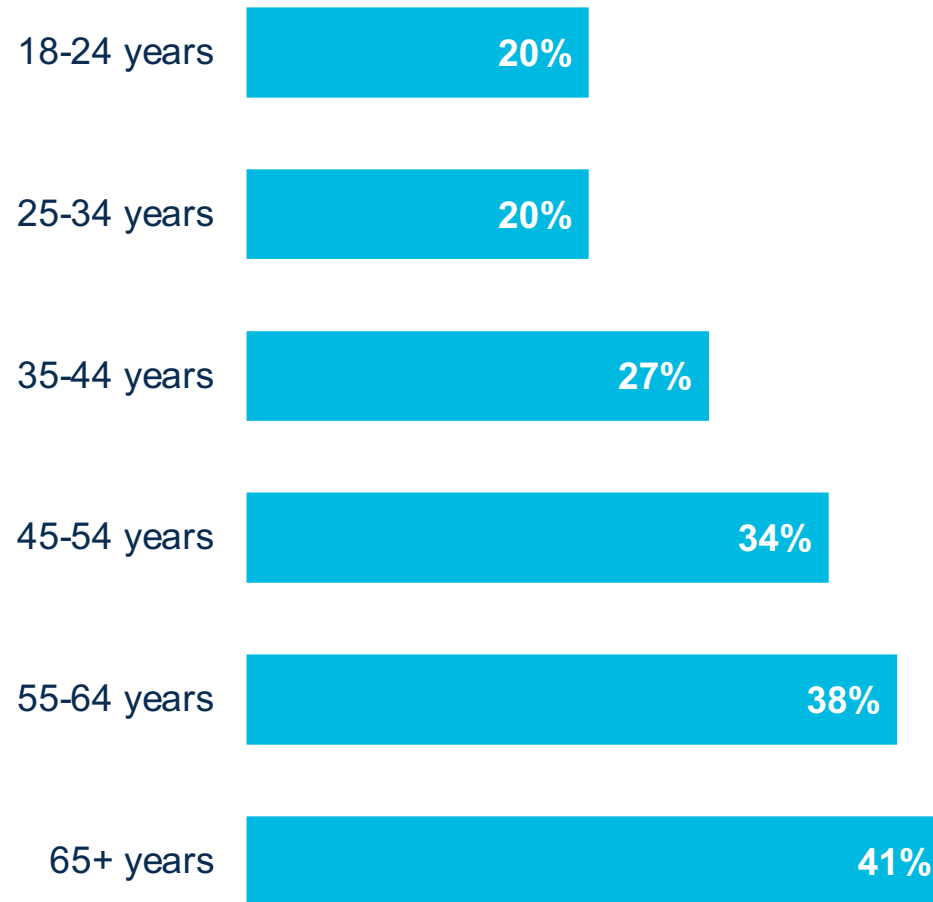
Of the following statements about nurses, which do you believe is most likely to be true? In England between 2010/11 and 2016/17 there was a...



Older age groups are much more likely than younger age groups to mistakenly believe that nursing levels have declined by a tenth.

For example, those aged 65 and above (41%) are twice as likely as those aged 25 to 34 (20%) to have such a negative perception.

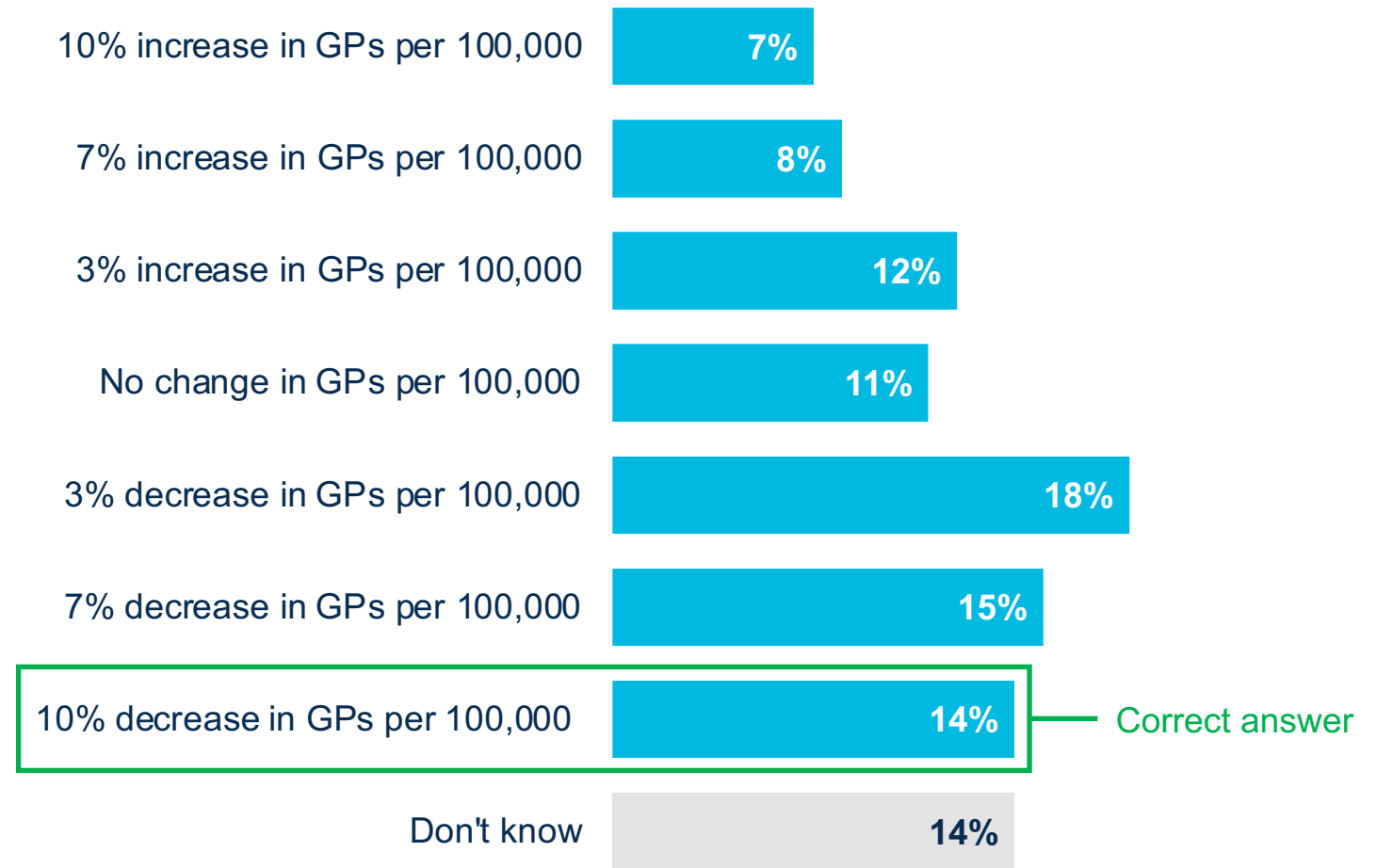
% who wrongly think there has been a 10% decrease in the number of nurses, by age



By contrast, the public have an overly positive perception of GP staffing levels. More than a quarter (27%) of people wrongly think there has been an increase in the number of GPs.

Just 14% rightly guess that the number of GPs has declined by a tenth,⁷ with the public more likely to think the reduction has been smaller.

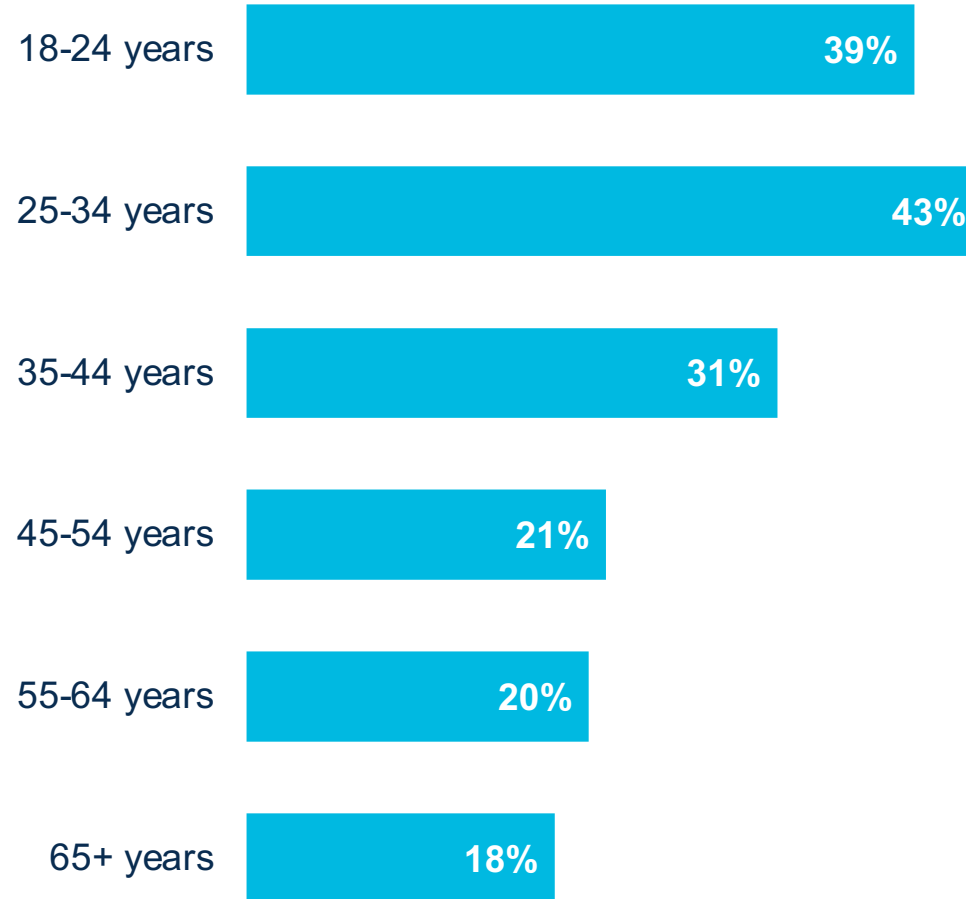
From 2009 to 2018, how do you think the number of GPs per 100,000 people in the UK has changed?



Younger people are more likely than older people to believe that GP numbers are better than they actually are.

For instance, one in five of those aged 65 and above holds this view, compared with two in five of those aged 25 to 34.

% who wrongly think the number of GPs per 100,000 people has increased, by age

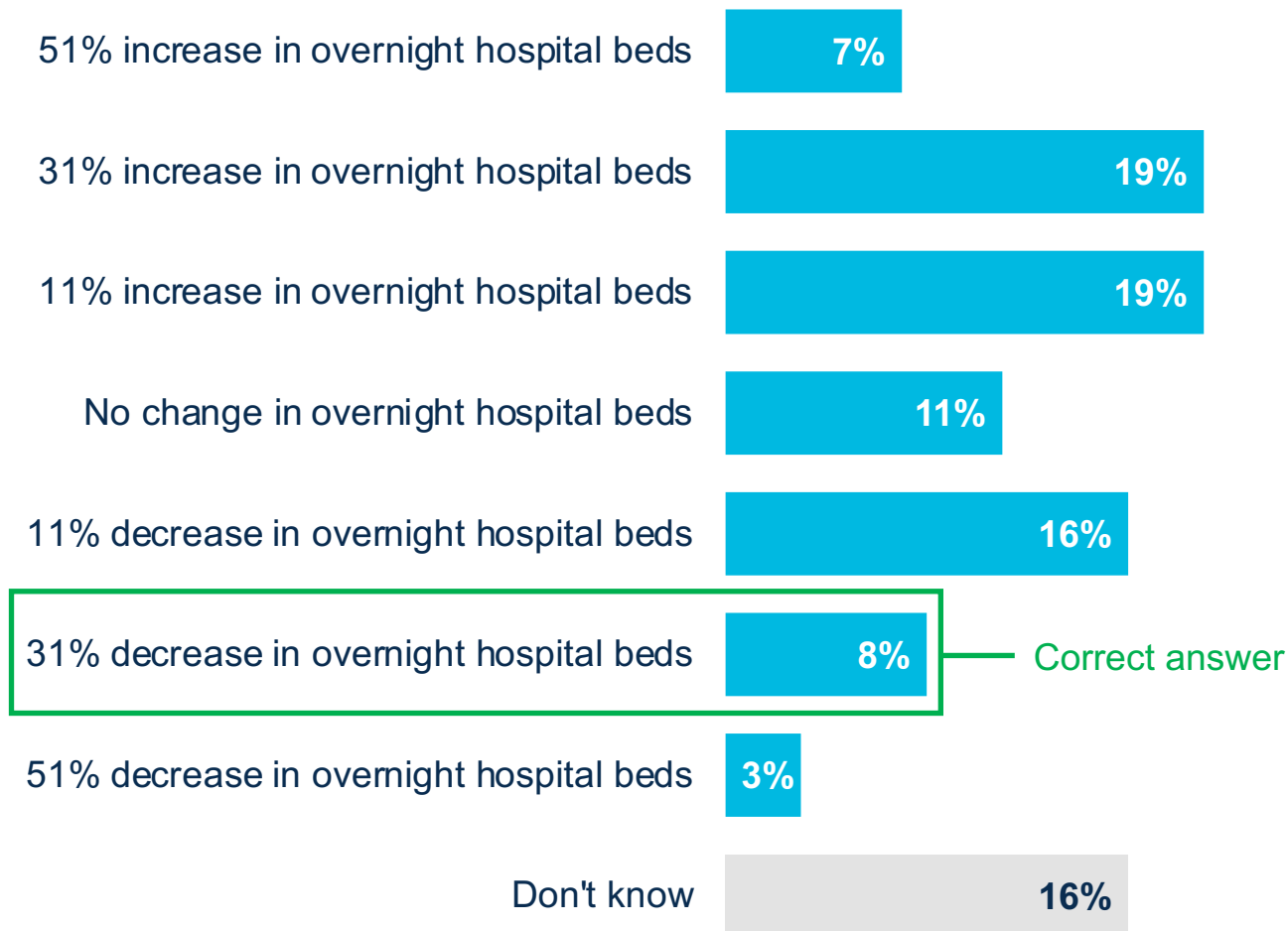


The public also have an overly positive view of hospital bed capacity in England.

Just 8% of people correctly guess that there has been a 31% decrease in overnight hospital beds over the past decade.⁸

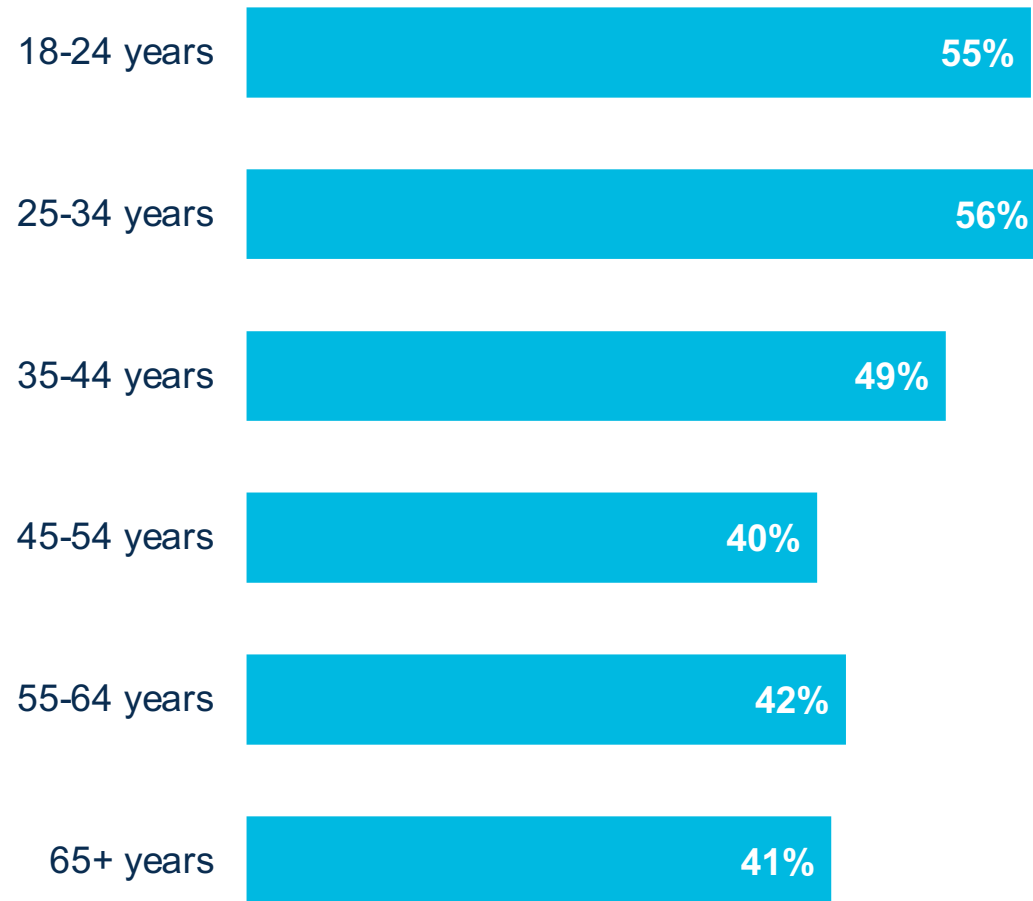
Overall, 46% of the public think the number of such beds has increased, compared with 27% who think it has decreased.

Overnight hospital beds are the total number of beds that are maintained, staffed and either occupied by a patient or immediately available for overnight use. Of the following statements about hospital beds, which do you think is most likely to be true? In England between 2010/11 and 2019/20 there was a...



As with views of how GP and nursing numbers have changed, younger people are more likely than older people to have an overly positive perception of the variation in overnight bed numbers between 2010/11 and 2019/20.

% who wrongly think the number of overnight beds has increased, by age



17% of adults in England smoked in 2017.⁹ However, the public guess the proportion of smokers is about twice as high.

They get slightly closer to the answer, with a guess of 32%, when told there were around a quarter of adults who smoked in 2006. But 45% of people who were given this information still guessed that smoking had increased by 2017.

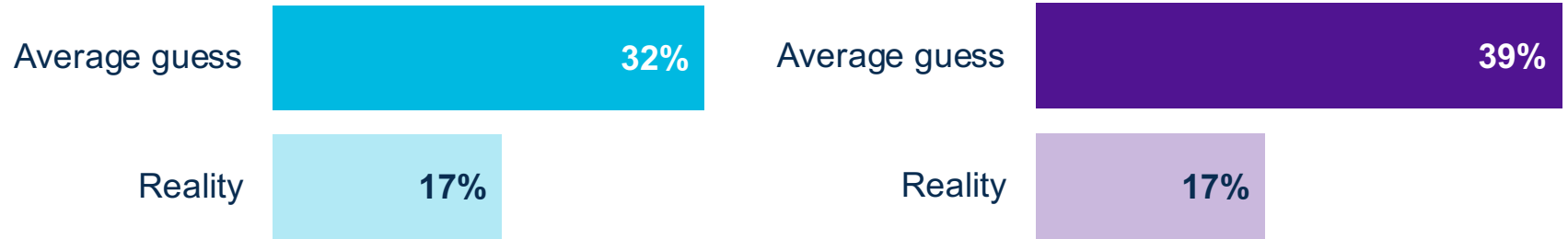
And looking at the distribution of those guesses, people who have been told this information are more much likely to correctly put the proportion of smokers at between 1-19%.

Sample A:

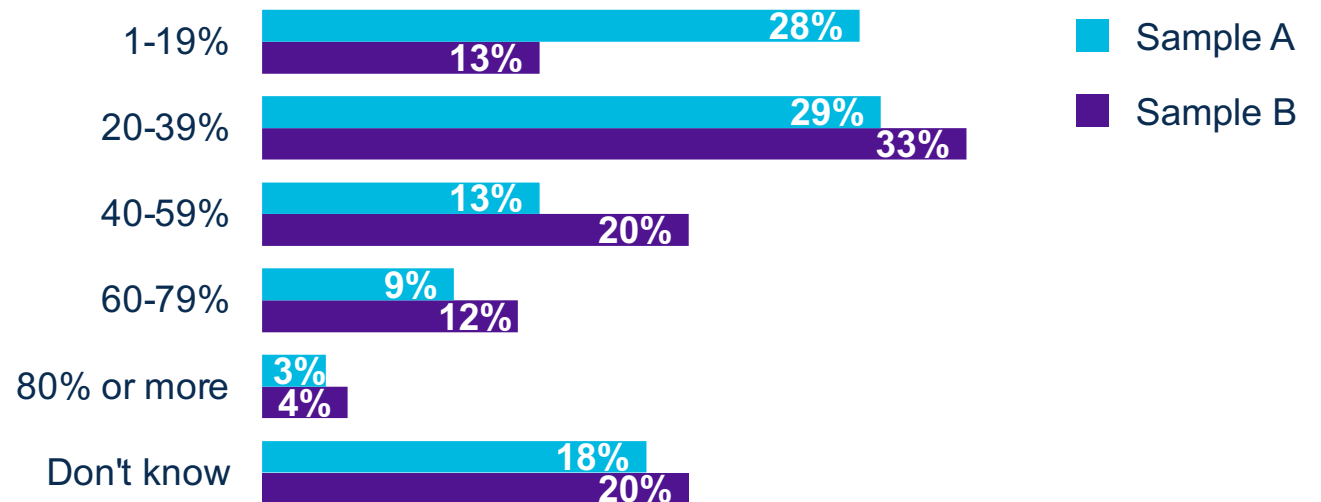
In 2006, 26% of English adults smoked. What percentage of adults in England do you think smoked in 2017?

Sample B:

What percentage of adults in England do you think smoked in 2017?



Distribution of guesses



And there is an age divide in perceptions of how widespread smoking is in England.

Younger people overestimate the percentage of smokers in the country by much more than do older people.

For example, among respondents in sample A, 18-24-year-olds overestimate the proportion of smokers by 32 percentage points, while those aged 65 and above only overestimate the reality by seven points.

Sample A:

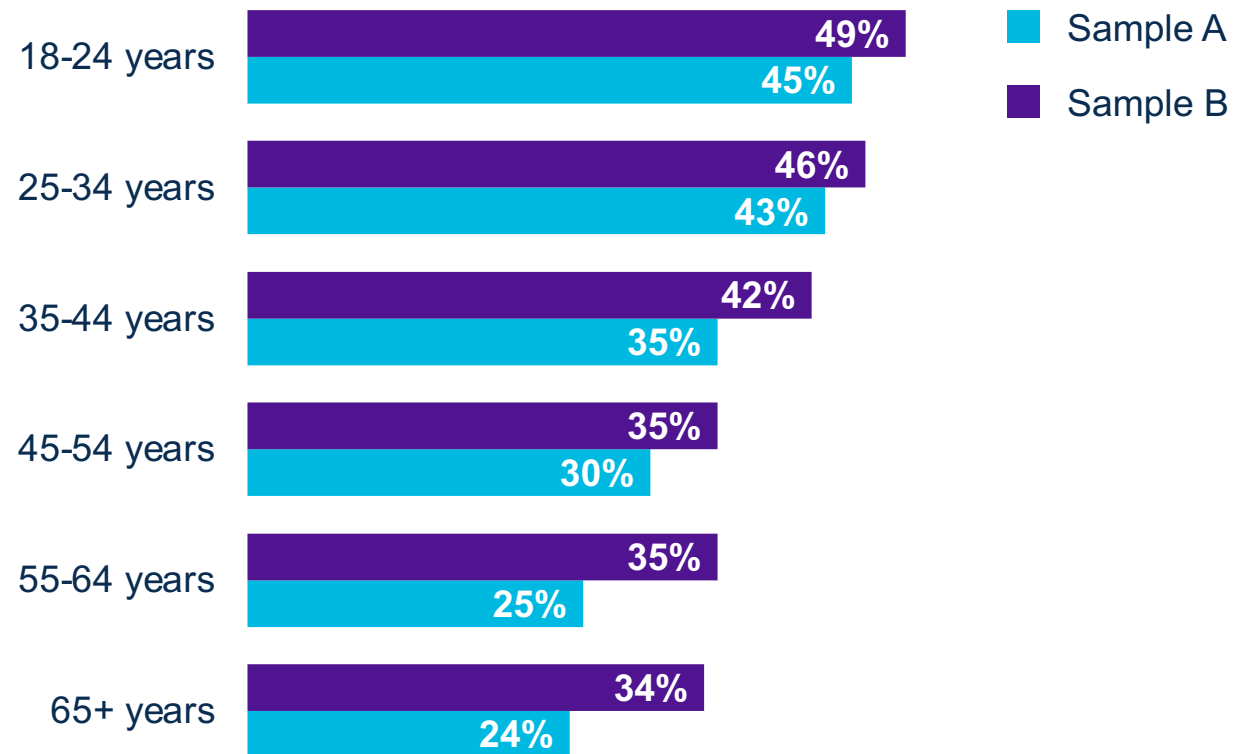
In 2006, 26% of English adults smoked. What percentage of adults in England do you think smoked in 2017?

Sample B:

What percentage of adults in England do you think smoked in 2017?

Average guesses, by age

Reality: 17%



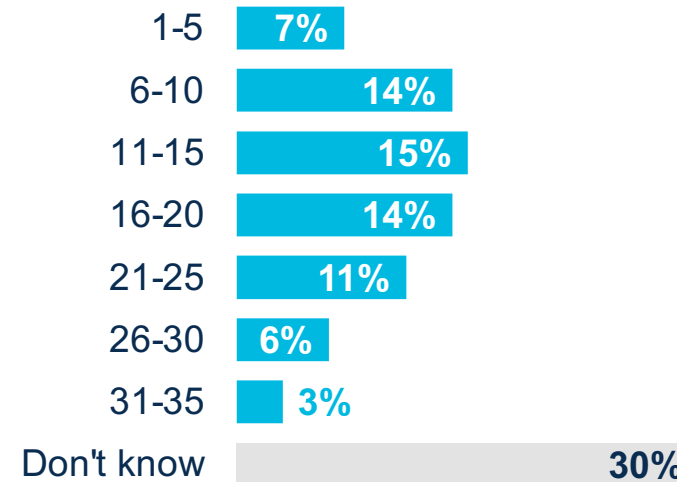
People in England guess that life expectancy in the UK compares slightly more favourably to other nations than it actually does.

The public's average guess is that the UK ranks 16th out of 35 OECD countries on this measure, when it actually came 23rd in 2019.¹⁰

The OECD is a group of 35 high income countries. If we ordered these countries according to life expectancy at birth for men and women combined in 2019, where do you believe the UK would rank? (Where rank 1 means the UK has the highest life expectancy and rank 35 means the UK has the lowest life expectancy)



Distribution of guesses



A woman living in one of the least deprived deciles of England can expect to live 8 years longer than a woman living in one of the most deprived.¹¹

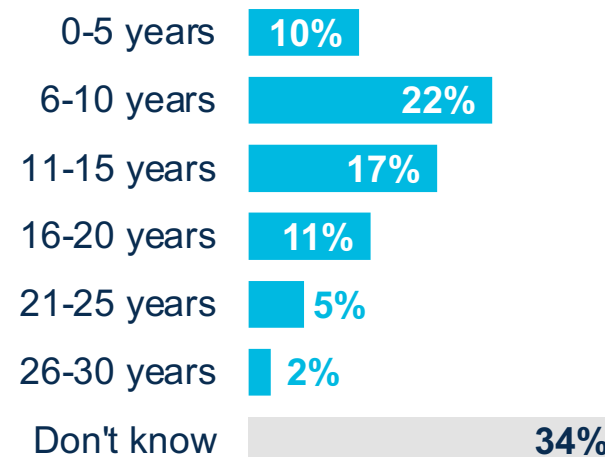
The public's average guess overestimates the difference that living in areas of varying deprivation makes, putting the gap at 12 years.

But despite this, the distribution of guesses shows that 6-10 years is the most commonly chosen range of responses among those who made an estimate.

Life expectancy varies in different areas of the country. By how many more years do you think a woman living in the least deprived 10% of local areas in England could expect to live compared to a woman living in one of the most deprived 10% of areas?



Distribution of guesses



Perceptions vs reality: what the public get **right** about the state of the NHS and the health of the nation

People in England have a more accurate perception of certain other aspects of how the NHS operates, such as the proportion of staff who work unpaid extra hours each week.

A majority also correctly identify that NHS output has increased in recent years, and they have a realistic view of where the UK ranks on healthcare spending compared with other OECD nations.

On health indicators in the UK, the public rightly recognise that life expectancy has increased over the past decade or so, and they come close in their guess of how long an average man can expect to live in good health.

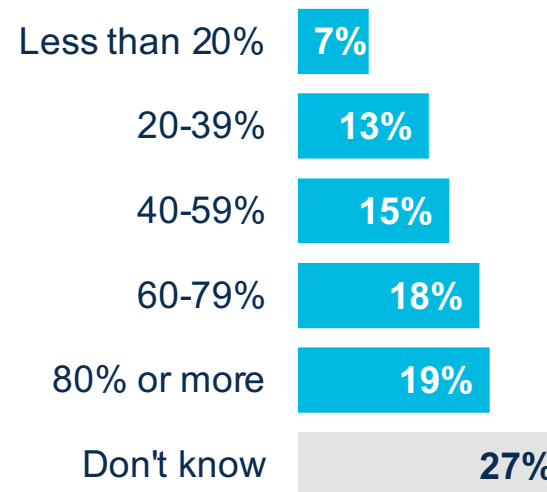
In 2019, 56% of NHS staff in England reported working additional unpaid hours each week,¹² and the public have a very accurate perception of this workload, based on their average guess of 57%.

However, the distribution of responses reveals that some sections of the public do still overestimate how many NHS staff are doing extra unpaid work. One in five think at least 80% of staff do additional unpaid hours each week, and another one in five put it at 60-79% of the workforce.

In 2019, what proportion of NHS staff in England do you think reported that they worked unpaid additional hours each week?



Distribution of guesses

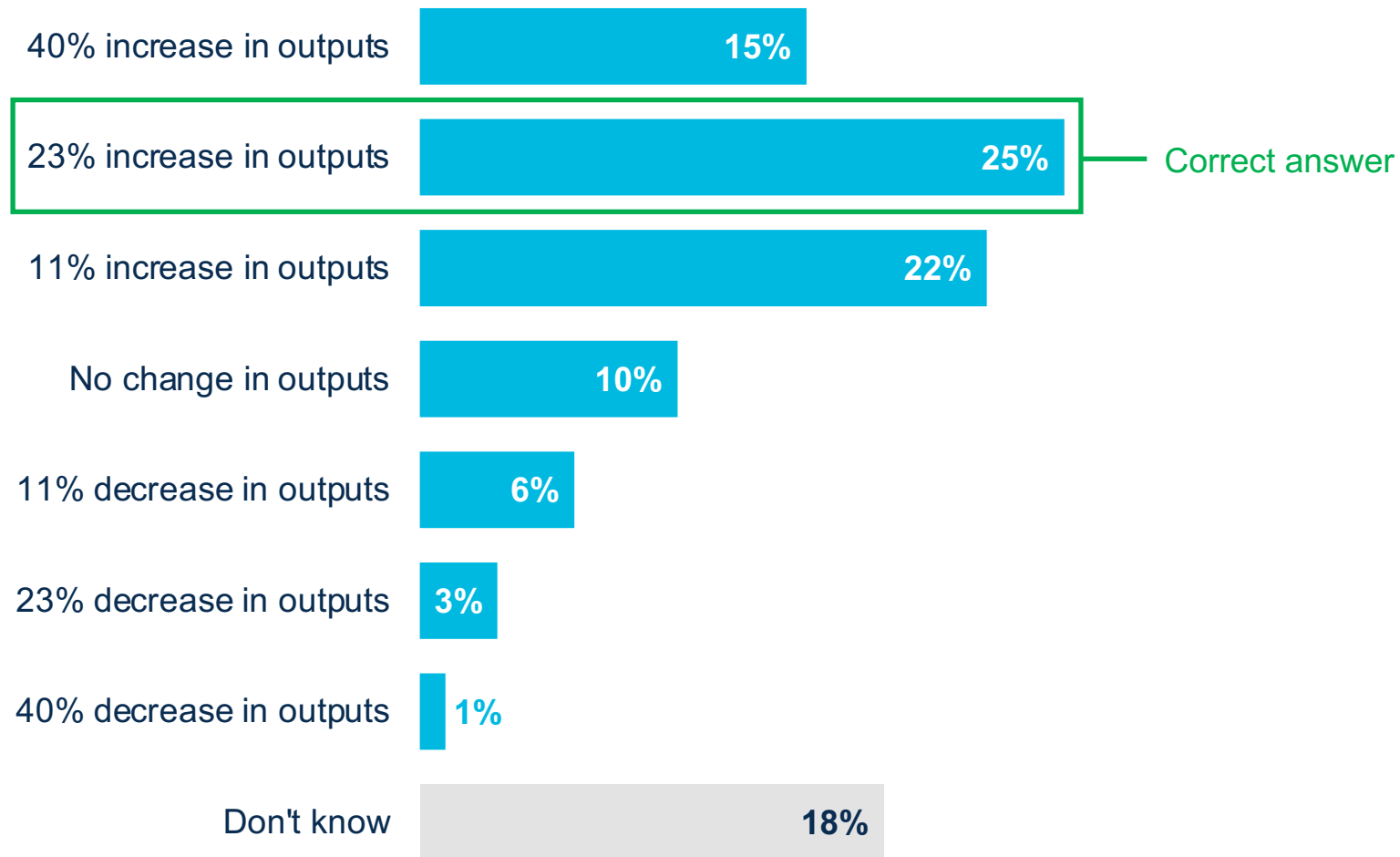


There was a 23% increase in NHS outputs between 2010/11 and 2016/17,¹³ and this is most commonly guessed option, with a quarter of people in England correctly selecting it.

Overall, 61% correctly identify there was an increase in outputs over this period, while 11% think there was a decrease.

Some figures differ from charts due to rounding.

The NHS counts all its outputs, from the number of operations it performs, the number of A&E visits it deals with, the number of ambulance journeys made, the number of GP consultations, and so on. Of the following statements about “outputs”, which do you believe is most likely to be true? In England between 2010/11 and 2016/17 there was a...



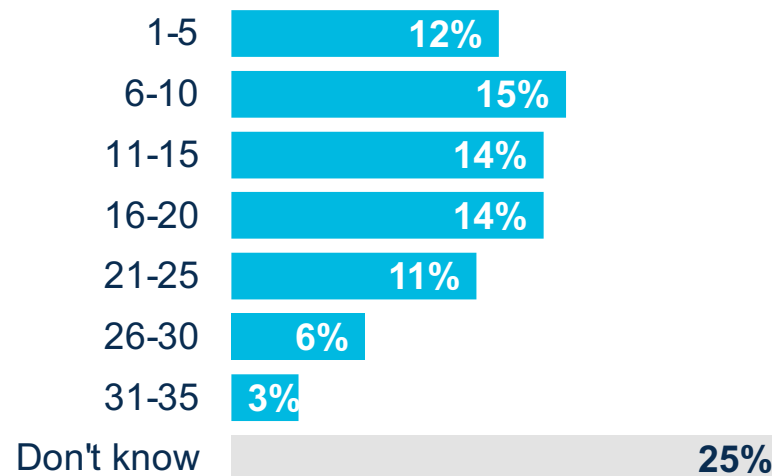
The public's average estimate for where the UK ranks on healthcare spending in the OECD is very close to the reality – they guess that the UK comes 15th out of 35 countries, and in reality the country is placed 16th.¹⁴

But a quarter (27%) of the population overestimate the UK's healthcare spend, thinking that the country ranks in the top 10 of OECD nations. 12% put it in the top five.

The OECD is a group of 35 high income countries. If we ordered these countries according to the average amount spent on healthcare per person in 2019, where do you believe the UK would rank? (where rank 1 means the UK spends the most per person on healthcare and rank 35 means the UK spends the least)



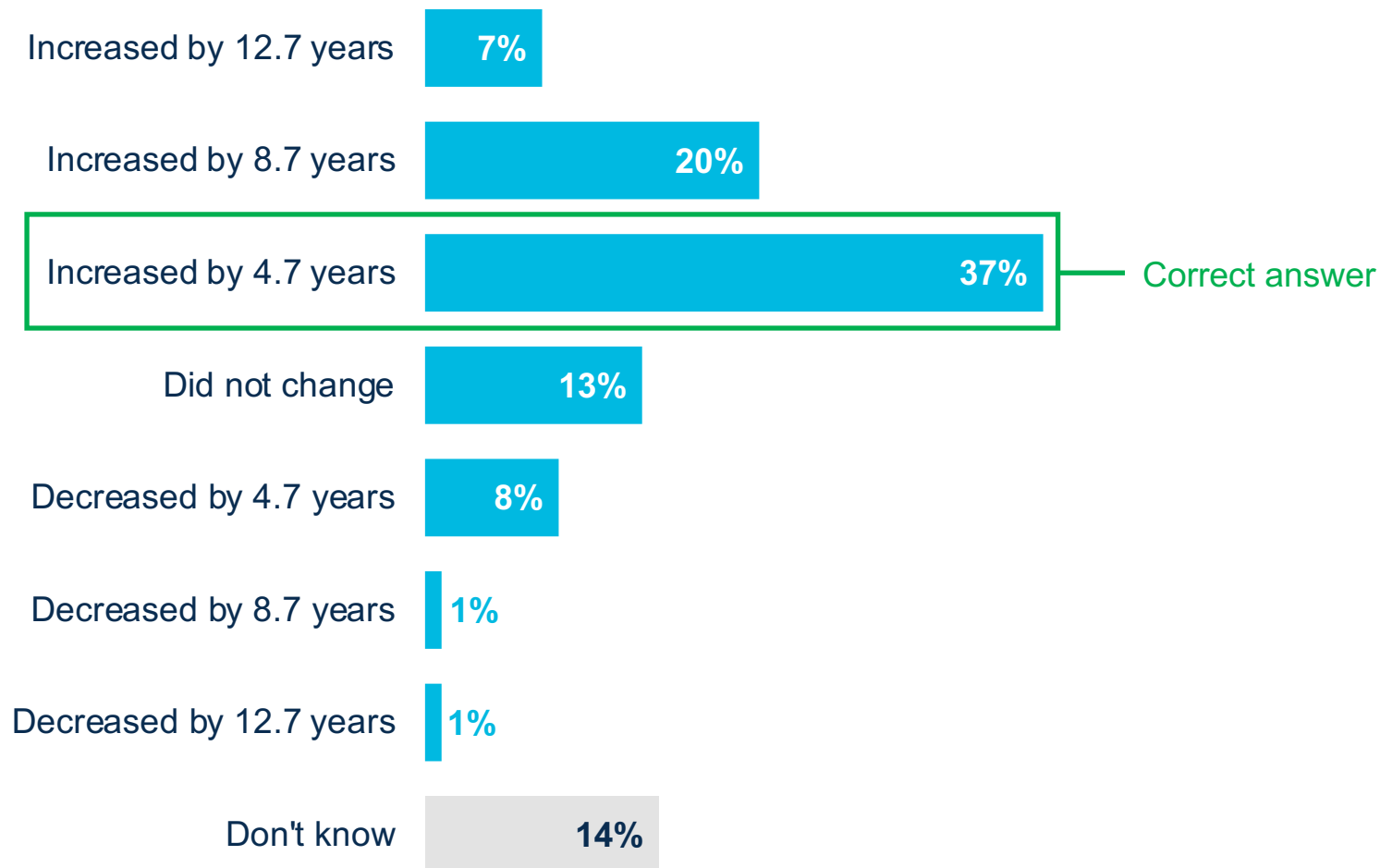
Distribution of guesses



The public have a relatively accurate view of the extent to which life expectancy has grown in recent decades. 37% correctly identify that it has increased by 4.7 years – by far the most common response.¹⁵

However, a quarter of people (27%) think it has risen by an even greater number of years, while one in 10 (10%) wrongly think it has declined.

Life expectancy at birth is a measure of how long the average person born that year will live. Of the following statements about life expectancy, which do you think is most likely to be true? In the UK, between 1997-99 and 2017-2019 life expectancy at birth for males...



A man in the UK born between 2016 and 2018 can expect to live in good health for 63 years on average.¹⁶

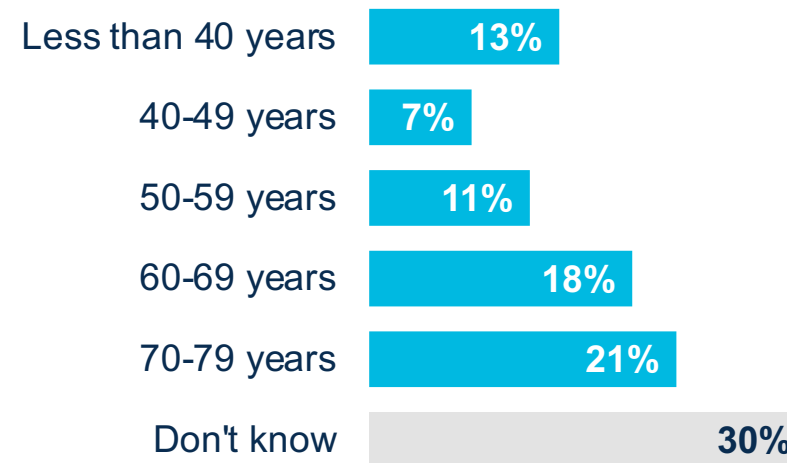
People in England come relatively close to the correct answer, guessing 56 years.

But one in five (21%) have an overly optimistic perception, putting their answer at between 70 and 79 years of good health.

Life expectancy at birth for a male born between 2016 and 2018 in the UK is 79.3 years. Out of those 79.3 years, how many years do you think a male born between 2016 and 2018 in the UK can expect to live in good health?



Distribution of guesses



The future of the NHS

The majority of people in England are optimistic about the quality of care they will receive through the NHS in the coming years, and more people believe the health service will exist in its current form in 2050 than do not. 18-24-year-olds are by far the most optimistic on both counts.

Among those who think the NHS will not survive as it is, the feature people think is most likely to be lost is free care at the point of use.

And a majority believe that the health service will only survive with a significant increase in funding. One in 10 think it will not survive no matter how much extra investment it receives.

The majority of people are optimistic about the quality of care they will receive through the NHS in the coming years. 72% expect the quality to remain at least as good as it is now, including 31% who expect it to increase.

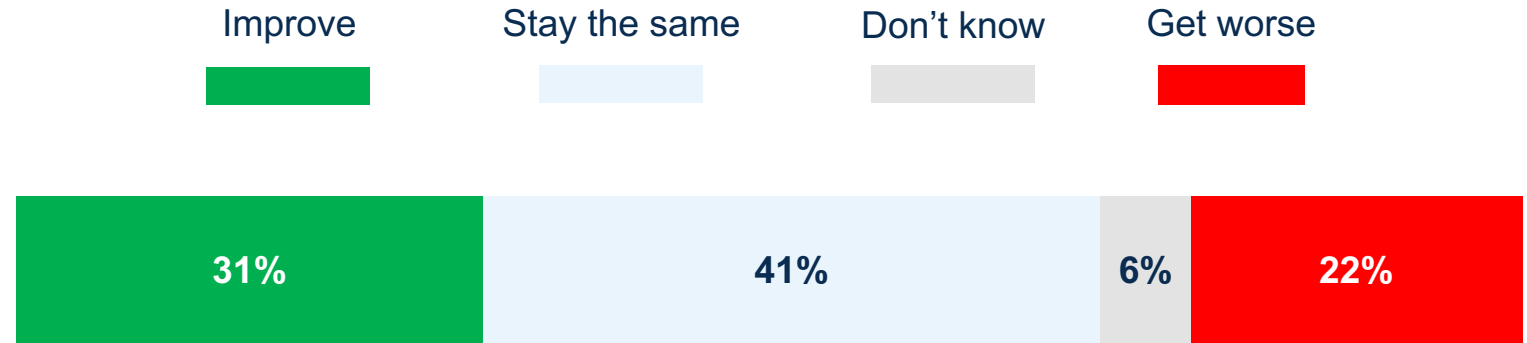
However, around one in five (22%) expect NHS healthcare to get worse.

18-24-year-olds are significantly more optimistic than other age groups about the quality of care in the future, with nearly half (48%) expecting it to improve.

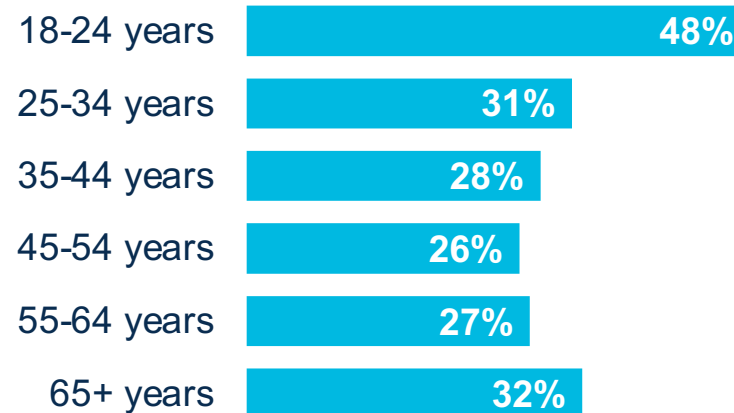
A 2018 survey found 21% of Britons thought their care would get better, 47% stay the same, and 32% get worse, over ten years. Our respondents are more positive by comparison.

And when looked at by political affiliation, Conservative voters are the least pessimistic about the quality of NHS care in the future.

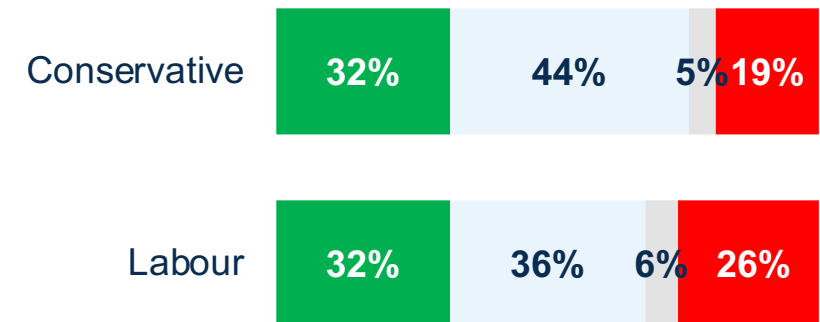
Over the coming years, do you expect the quality of the NHS healthcare that you and your family will have access to locally will improve, stay the same, or get worse?



% who say improve, by age



Perceptions by political affiliation

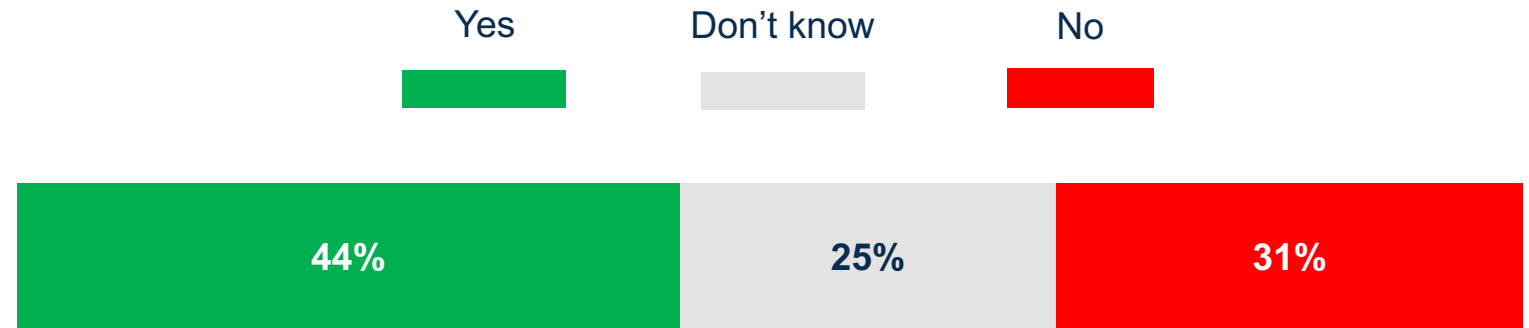


More people believe that the NHS will still exist in its current form in 2050 (44%) than believe it won't (31%).

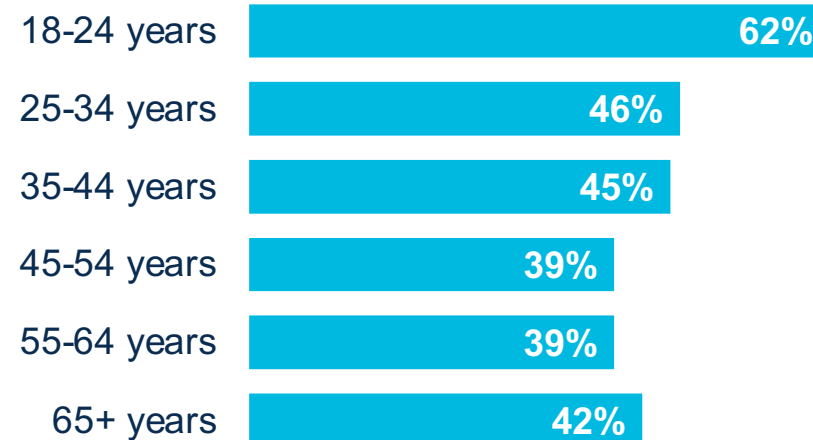
But there is a relatively high level of uncertainty, with 25% saying they don't know.

Again, those aged 18 to 24 are most optimistic about the NHS surviving with its current features for this long.

Do you believe that the NHS will still exist in 2050, providing a service that is tax funded, free at the point of use, and providing comprehensive care for all citizens?



% who say yes, by age



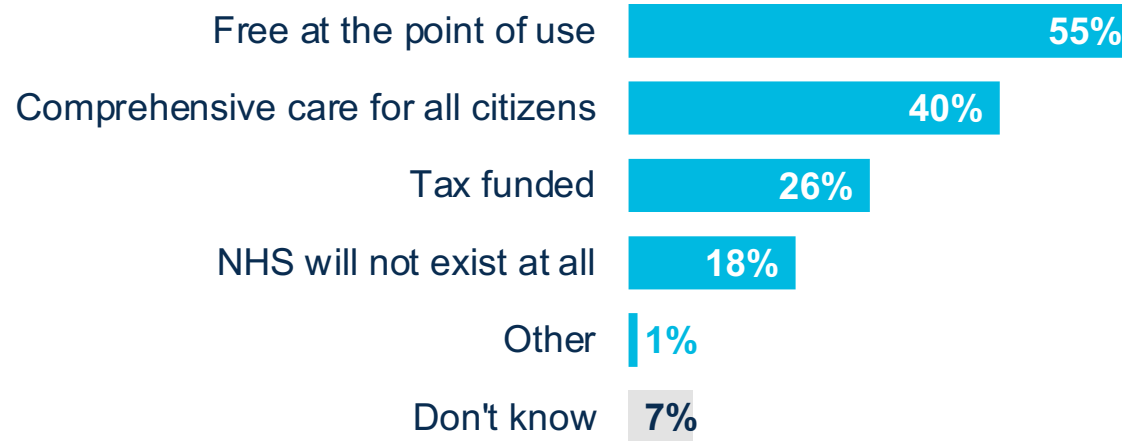
Those who believe the NHS will not exist in its current form in 2050 think the feature most likely to be lost is free care at the point of use.

55% of this group believe this aspect of the health service won't survive, while smaller proportions think it will no longer provide comprehensive care for all citizens (40%) or be tax funded (26%).

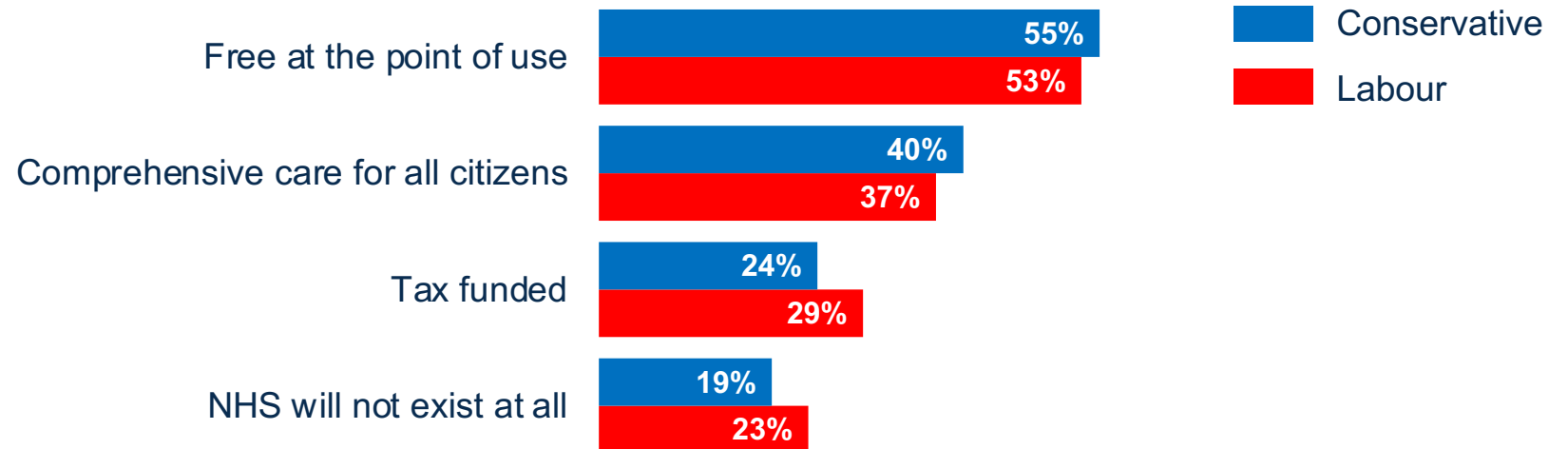
Nearly a fifth of these respondents (18%) did not believe the NHS will exist at all in 2050.

There is little difference in views between Conservative and Labour voters.

Which aspects do you believe will not be features of the NHS in 2050?



% by political affiliation

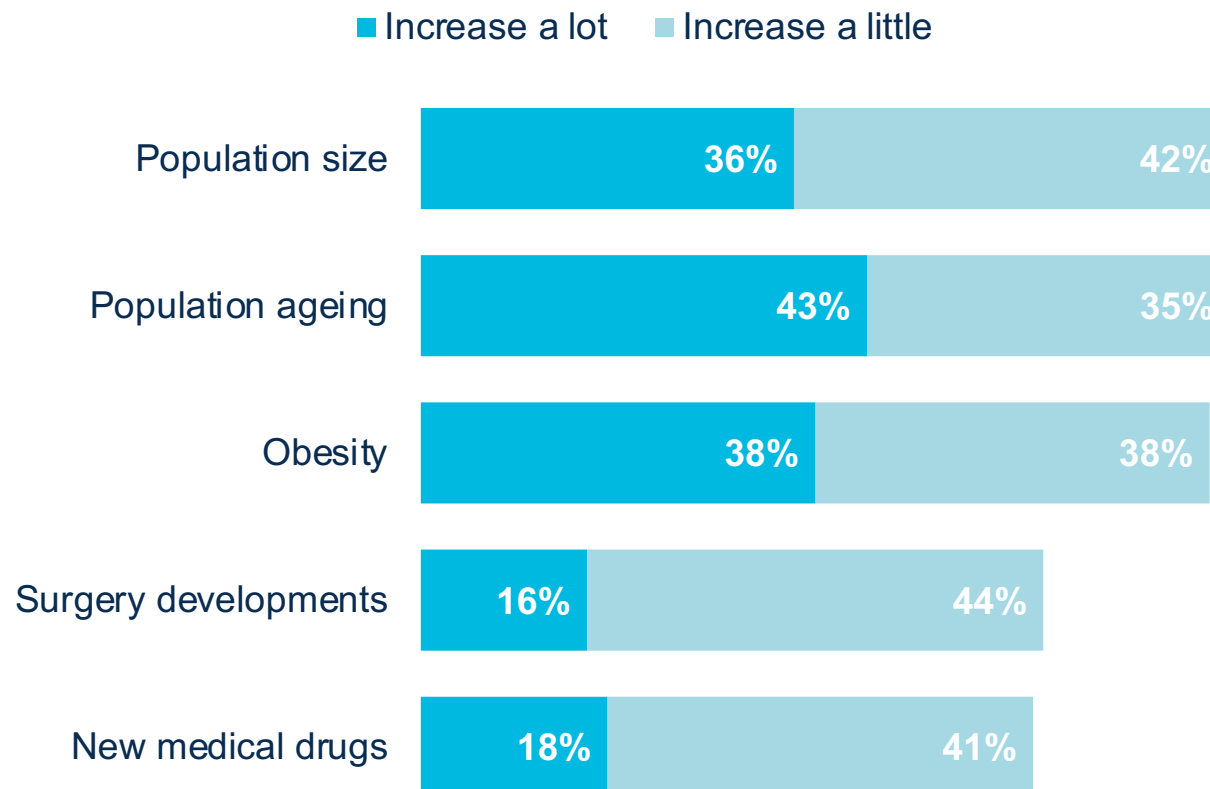


People expect demand on the NHS to increase in response to a range of factors. Population size, ageing and obesity are the most commonly selected causes of such an increase, with around three-quarters of the public saying they are factors that will cause demand to grow.

Smaller proportions expect new medical drugs and surgery developments to lead to increases in demand.

To what extent do you think public demand for NHS care will increase or decrease over the coming years as a result of each of the following factors?

% who say the following will increase demand a little or a lot



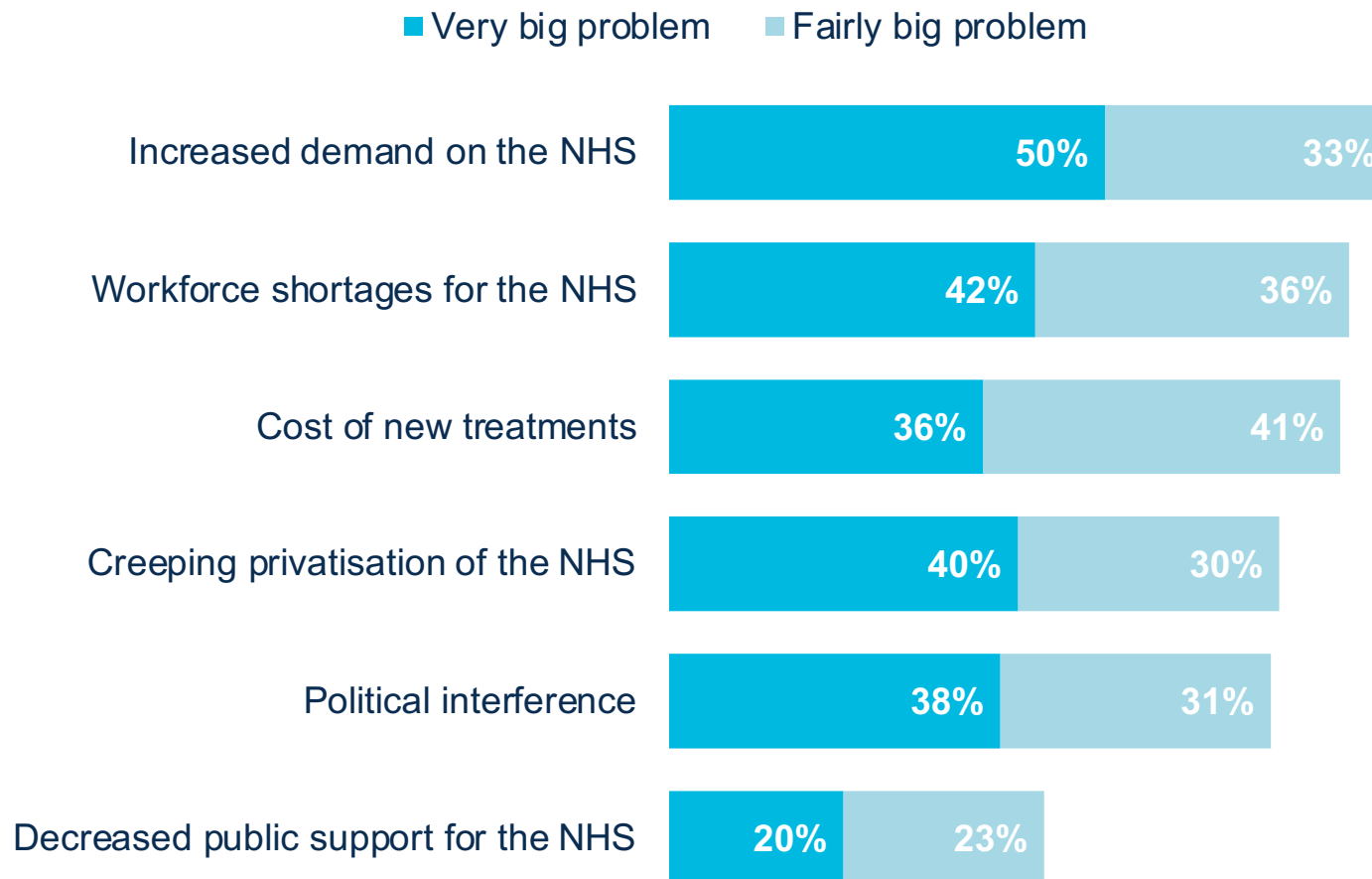
Increased demand (83%) is the top problem cited for maintaining the NHS in its current form, closely followed by workforce shortages (77%) and the cost of new treatments (77%).

Privatisation (70%) and political interference (69%) are slightly less of a concern in comparison, although significant majorities still consider them a fairly or very big problem.

By contrast, far fewer (43%) think decreased public support will be a problem for the survival of the health service.

How much of a problem do you think each of the following is to maintain the NHS as a service that is tax funded, free at the point of use, and providing comprehensive care for all citizens?

% who say a fairly or very big problem

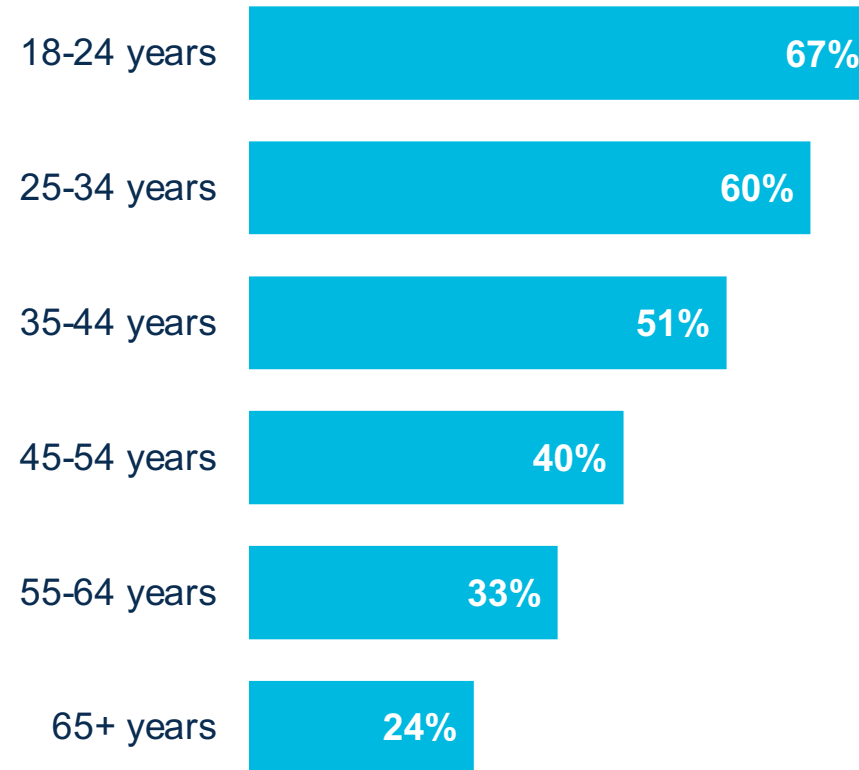


Younger age groups are much more likely to be concerned about the threat to the NHS posed by decreased public support.

59% of 18-44-year-olds consider it a problem for the survival of the NHS – almost twice as many as the 32% of those aged 45 and above who think the same.

How much of a problem do you think each of the following is to maintain the NHS as a service that is tax funded, free at the point of use, and providing comprehensive care for all citizens?

% who say decreased public support is a fairly or very big problem, by age

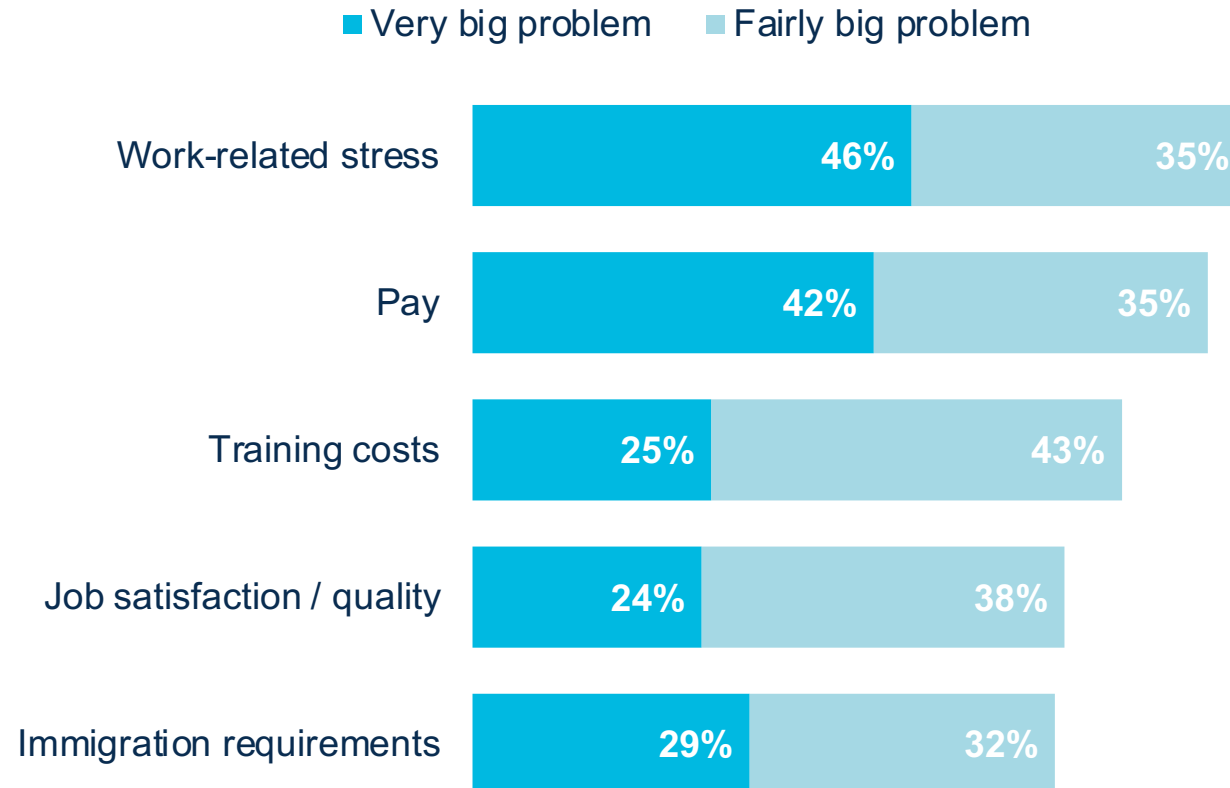


Most people see a range of issues as fairly or very big problems for NHS staff recruitment and retention, with work-related stress (81%) and pay (77%) selected by the biggest majorities.

While immigration requirements came bottom of the list of people's concerns, a significant majority of 61% still see them as a problem.

How much of a problem do you think each of the following are for recruitment and retention of NHS staff?

% who say a fairly big or very big problem

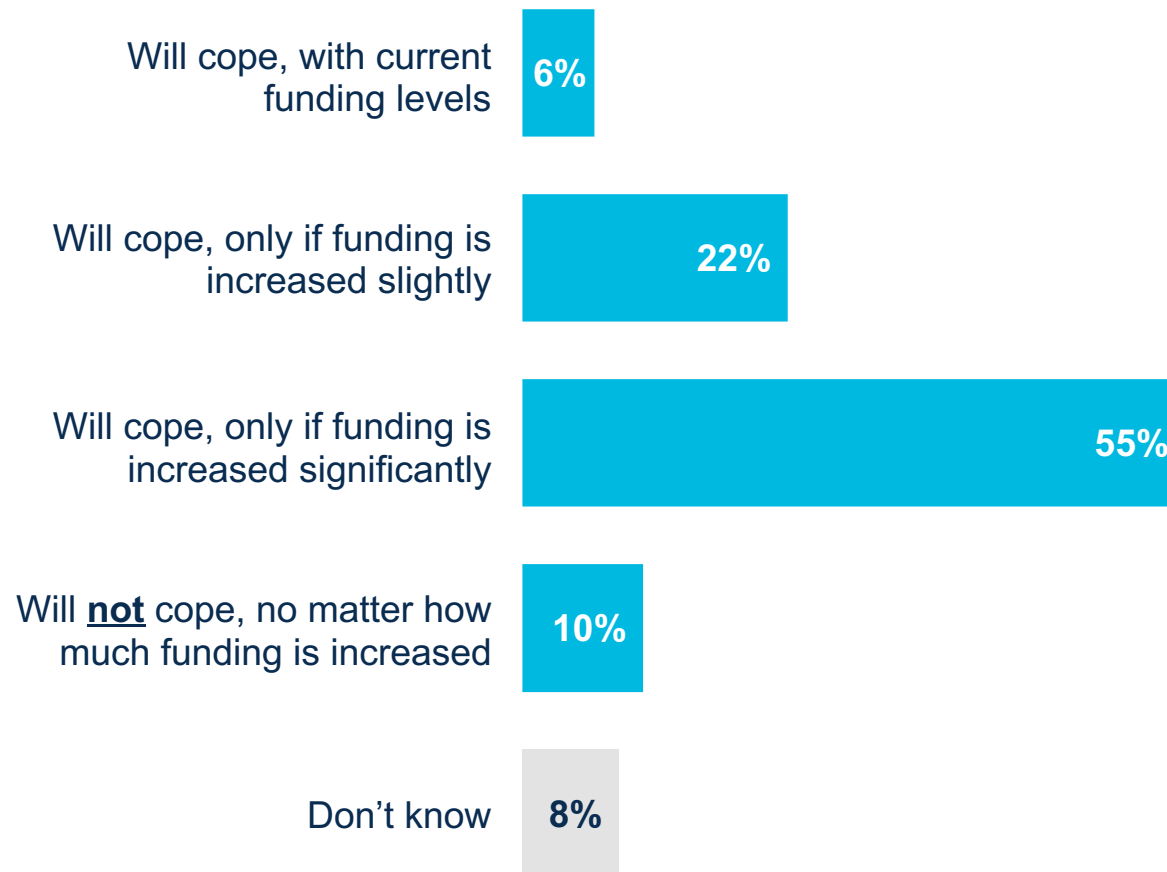


A majority (55%) believe a significant increase in funding is necessary if the NHS is to cope with increasing demand over the next 30 years.

Only 6% say the system will cope with current funding levels, and 22% say a slight funding increase is necessary.

10% do not believe the NHS will cope no matter how much funding is increased.

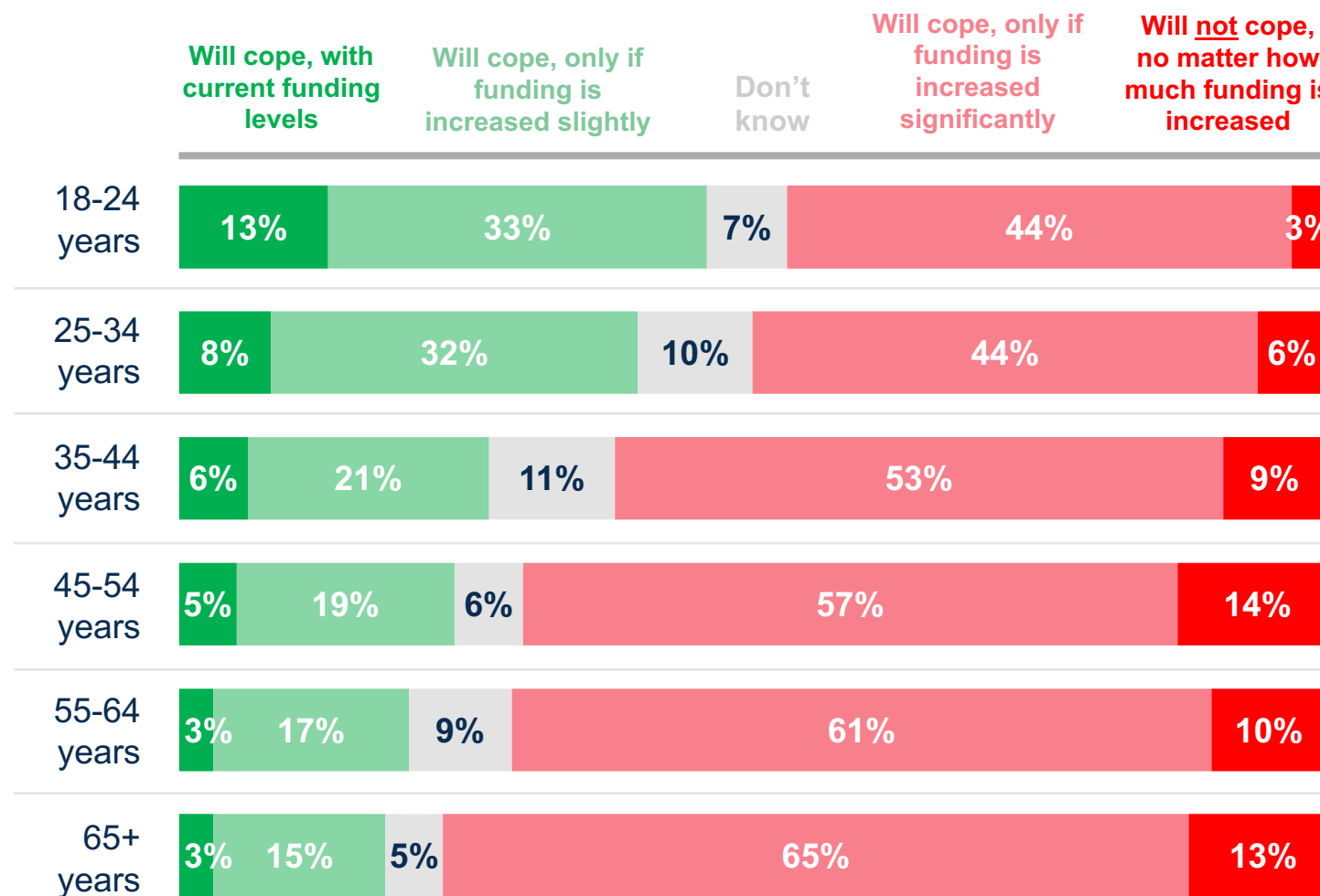
Factors such as population ageing, more people living with chronic conditions, and new medical drugs and technology may all have impacts upon the future demand for care. To what extent do you think that the NHS will cope with increases in demand for care without a change in quality of care, or not, over the next 30 years?



Once again, younger age groups are most optimistic about the future of the NHS – even without a significant boost in investment.

44% of people aged 18 to 34 think the health service will be able to manage with current or slightly increased levels of funding – twice as high as the 22% of people aged 35 and above who think the same.

Factors such as population ageing, more people living with chronic conditions, and new medical drugs and technology may all have impacts upon the future demand for care. To what extent do you think that the NHS will cope with increases in demand for care without a change in quality of care, or not, over the next 30 years?

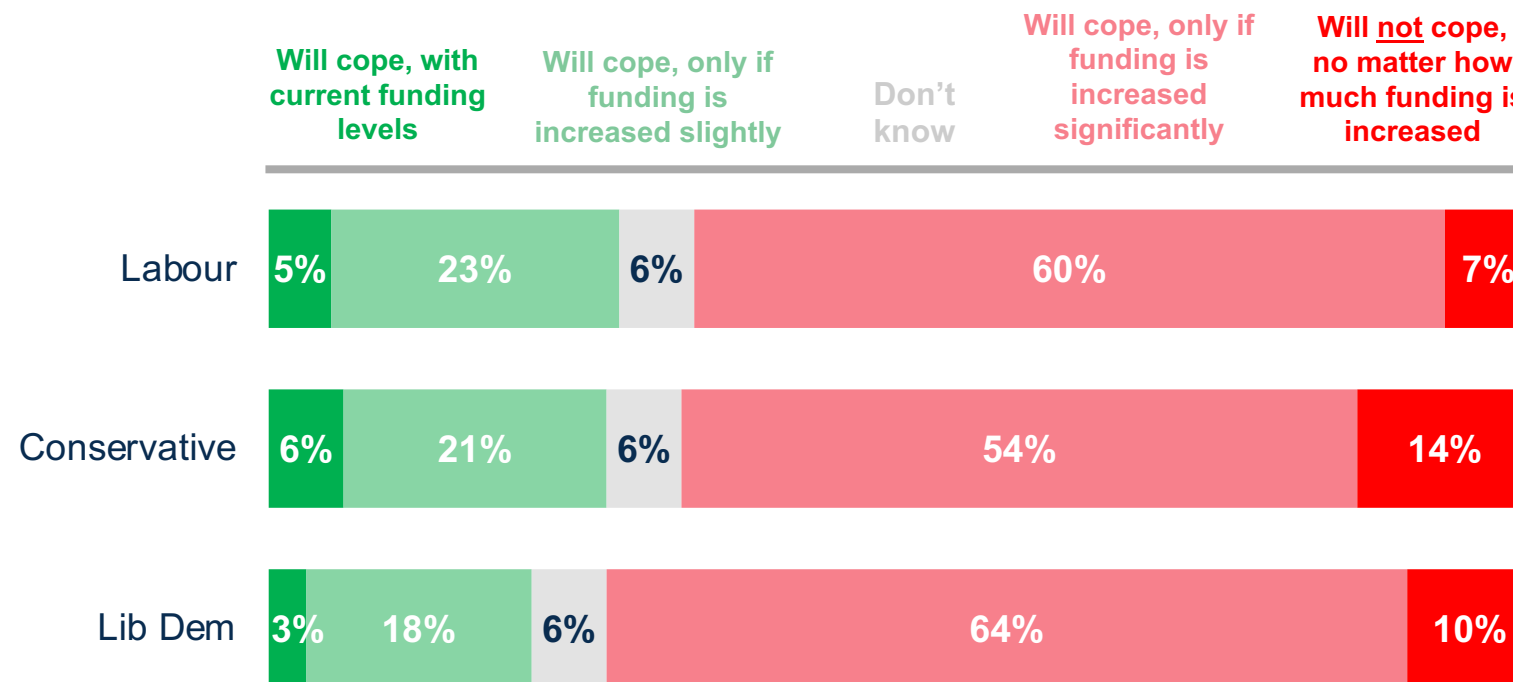


Base: 2056 English adults surveyed online from 26 November–1 December 2020

Lib Dem voters are most pessimistic about future NHS capacity, with 74% saying either the health service will only be able to cope if funding is increased significantly or will not be able to cope no matter what.

This compares with 68% of Conservative voters and 67% of Labour voters who think the same.

Factors such as population ageing, more people living with chronic conditions, and new medical drugs and technology may all have impacts upon the future demand for care. To what extent do you think that the NHS will cope with increases in demand for care without a change in quality of care, or not, over the next 30 years?



Base: 2056 English adults surveyed online from 26 November–1 December 2020

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Technical details

Savanta ComRes surveyed 2,056 English adults online from 26 November–1 December. Final data were weighted to be demographically representative of English adults 18+ by age, gender, region, SEG and both 2019 and 2016 voting history.

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