

Public satisfaction with the NHS in 2015

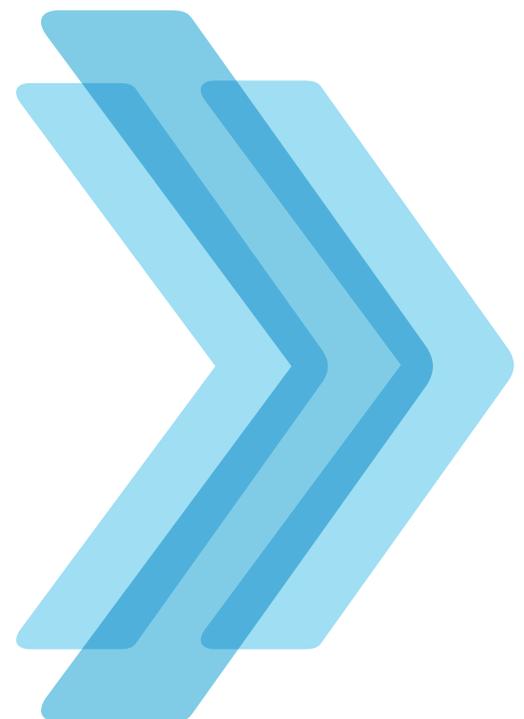
Results and trends
from the British Social
Attitudes survey

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Introduction

Since 1983, NatCen Social Research's British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey has asked members of the public about their views on, and feelings towards, the NHS and health and care issues generally. The latest survey was carried out between July and October 2015 and asked a nationally representative sample of more than 2,000 people about their satisfaction with the NHS overall, and of more than 1,000 people about their satisfaction with individual NHS services.

Below we summarise the headline results. More detail from the survey will be published by NatCen Social Research in summer 2016.

Key findings

- Overall public satisfaction with the NHS fell by 5 percentage points in 2015 to 60 per cent. At the same time, dissatisfaction with the service rose by 8 percentage points to 23 per cent, taking dissatisfaction back to the levels reported between 2011 and 2013.
- Satisfaction with GP services remained higher than with other NHS services. However, satisfaction of 69 per cent in 2015 was the lowest rate recorded since the survey began in 1983.
- Satisfaction with NHS dentistry remained flat at 54 per cent.
- Satisfaction with outpatient services also remained stable at 66 per cent, but was higher than satisfaction with other hospital-based services.
- Satisfaction with inpatient services was 58 per cent, having remained statistically unchanged for the past three years.
- Satisfaction with accident and emergency (A&E) services was lower than satisfaction with other hospital-based services at 53 per cent.
- Satisfaction with social care services provided by local authorities was 26 per cent, 5 percentage points lower than in 2014 and far lower than satisfaction with health care services.
- Overall satisfaction with the NHS was higher among supporters of the Conservative party (65 per cent) than among Labour supporters (59 per cent). After a jump in satisfaction among Labour supporters in 2014, 2015 saw satisfaction levels in this group return to its 2013 level with an 11 percentage point drop.
- The three main reasons people gave for being satisfied with the health service were: the quality of care in the NHS, the fact that the NHS is free at the point of use, and the range of services and treatments available. The three main reasons that people gave for being dissatisfied with the health service were: long waiting times, staff shortages and lack of funding.
- Public satisfaction with the NHS is a multi-faceted measure influenced by respondents' views on politics, policy and public institutions as well as their experience of the NHS. It is not a straightforward indicator of NHS performance.

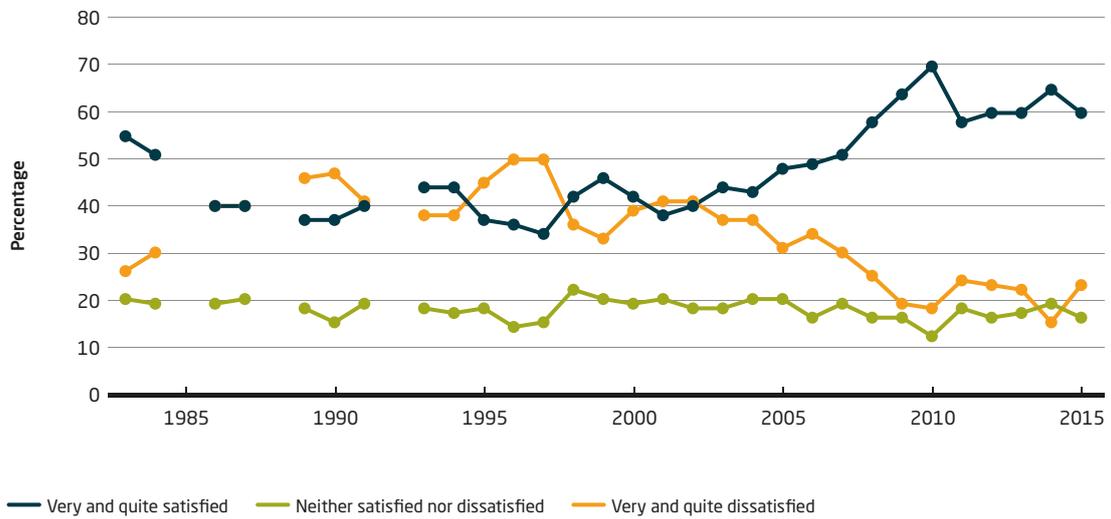
How satisfied is the British public with the NHS overall?

For more than 30 years, the British Social Attitudes survey has asked members of the public, 'All in all, how satisfied or dissatisfied would you say you are with the way in which the National Health Service runs nowadays?' This overall measure of satisfaction with the NHS provides a fascinating picture of how public attitudes towards the NHS have changed over time.

In 2015, overall NHS satisfaction fell to 60 per cent, down from 65 per cent in 2014. At the same time, dissatisfaction with the NHS rose by 8 percentage points to 23 per cent, the largest single-year increase since the survey began in 1983. This took dissatisfaction back to the level reported between 2011 and 2013.

Figure 1 shows that the decade of NHS funding growth during the 2000s was accompanied by increasing levels of public satisfaction, which reached a peak in 2010 at 70 per cent. Although satisfaction in 2015 is still high by historic standards, it is now nine percentage points below its 2010 peak.

Figure 1 Public satisfaction with the NHS, 1983 to 2015



Question asked: 'All in all, how satisfied or dissatisfied would you say you are with the way in which the National Health Service runs nowadays?'

This question was not asked in 1985, 1988 and 1992

Source: King's Fund analysis of NatCen Social Research's British Social Attitudes survey data

Who is the most satisfied with the NHS?

Satisfaction levels vary among different groups within the population. Figure 2 shows satisfaction rates split by household income, country, gender, age and recent contact with inpatient services. Confidence intervals show the range of values that, based on the survey data, we can be 95 per cent certain include the true satisfaction level for each group. Where the confidence intervals overlap, we cannot be confident the recorded satisfaction levels differ between groups.

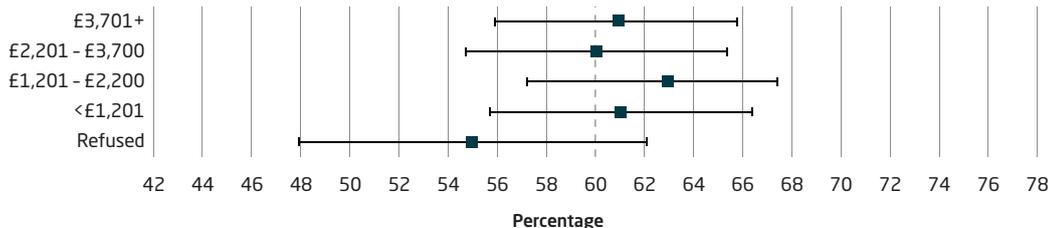
People aged 75 and over have higher levels of satisfaction than younger people. Satisfaction rates vary less across income groups, between men and women and between those with and without recent contact with inpatient services (and there were no statistically significant differences for these groups). There is also no statistically significant difference in satisfaction rates by country this year.

To understand the relative impact of different population characteristics on satisfaction, we are conducting more detailed analyses, which will be published by NatCen in the summer.

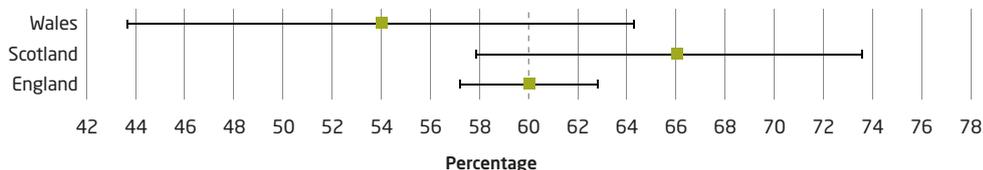
Figure 2 Percentage of respondents in different population groups who are very or quite satisfied with the NHS, 2015

--- Survey as a whole

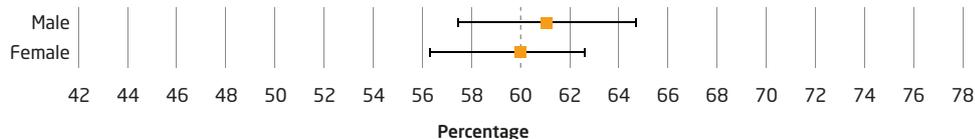
Household income (monthly, before tax)



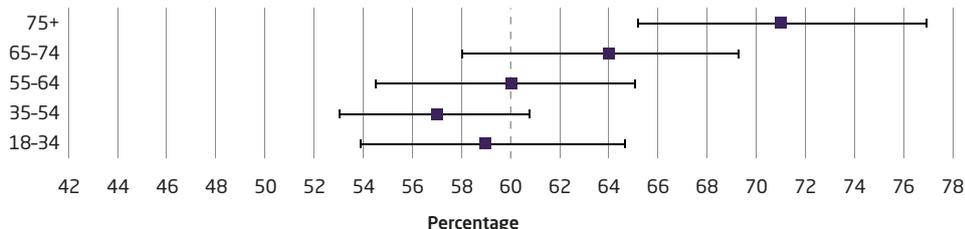
Country



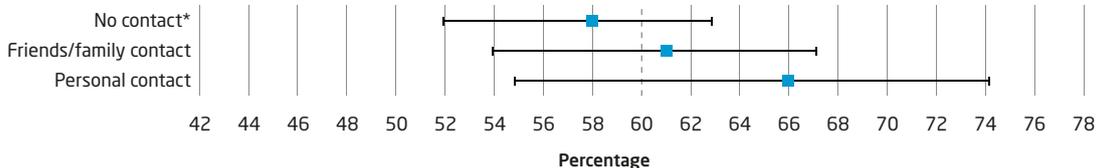
Gender



Age



Contact with NHS inpatient services in past year



*No contact by the respondent or their family and friends

Question asked: 'All in all, how satisfied or dissatisfied would you say you are with the way in which the National Health Service runs nowadays?'

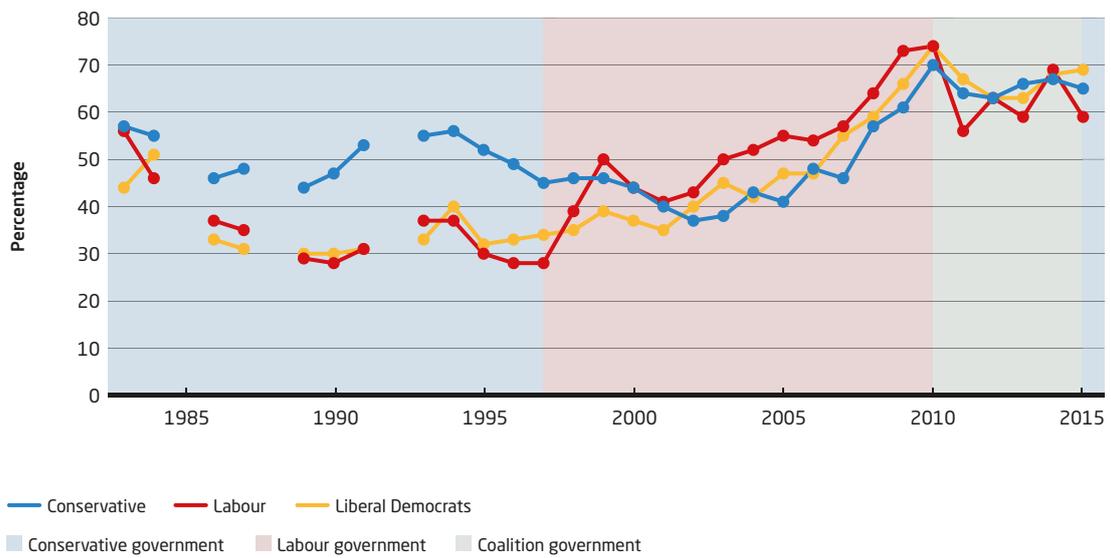
Error bars show the 95% confidence interval for each data point

Source: King's Fund analysis of NatCen Social Research's British Social Attitudes survey data

Satisfaction levels also tend to be higher among supporters of the political party in power, implying people consider the government's competence in running the health service in their ratings. Figure 3 shows that Labour supporters were the most satisfied group during much of the Labour party's time in power, while Conservative and Liberal Democrat supporters generally reported higher levels of satisfaction during the last (coalition) parliament.

Over the past five years, satisfaction levels among Conservative supporters have remained relatively stable, while the views of Labour supporters have fluctuated. In the [2014 British Social Attitudes survey](#), there was an 11 percentage point jump in satisfaction levels among Labour supporters, which was surprising during a period of coalition government when the NHS was under pressure financially. While there may have been a genuine feeling among Labour supporters that the NHS had improved in 2014, a more likely explanation is that they were signalling a vote of support for the health service as an institution during tough times. Whatever the explanation, the effect was short-lived. In 2015, satisfaction among Labour supporters fell back to its 2013 level, dropping by 11 percentage points to 59 per cent, their views perhaps reflecting the general election campaign and its outcome.

Figure 3 Satisfaction with the NHS by party political identification - very or quite satisfied, 1983 to 2015



Question asked: 'All in all, how satisfied or dissatisfied would you say you are with the way in which the National Health Service runs nowadays?'

Satisfaction question not asked in 1985, 1988 and 1992

Source: King's Fund analysis of NatCen Social Research's British Social Attitudes survey data

How satisfied is the British public with different NHS services?

The survey also asks the public for its views on specific health and social care services. When interpreting this data, it is important to remember that many respondents will not have recently used the particular service they have been asked to comment on. Because of this, they are asked to consider either their own experience or what they have heard from other sources in their answers.

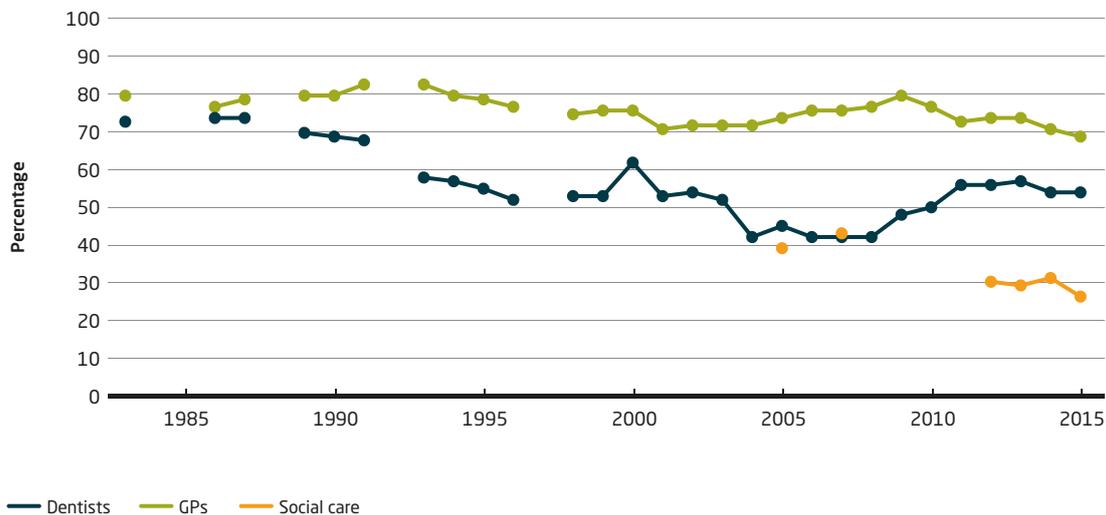
Each year, there are higher levels of satisfaction with general practice than with other NHS services and 2015 is no exception. However, satisfaction with general practice has been falling since 2010 and at 69 per cent in the latest survey, it is currently at the lowest level ever recorded in the BSA. [The national GP patient survey](#) found a similar (although less pronounced) trend in patient views. While patients' ratings of their overall experience in general practice remain positive, they have declined slightly since 2012.

Most respondents can draw on their own experience of GP services when answering this question – [on average people visit their GP every two months](#). However, their views may also have been influenced by negative stories in the press about pressures in general practice.

People were less satisfied with NHS dentistry services. After a period of growing satisfaction in the late 2000s, rates plateaued at the start of this decade, and in 2015, satisfaction with dentistry of 54 per cent is unchanged from the previous year.

The survey defines social care services as personal support services provided by local authorities for people who cannot look after themselves because of illness, disability or age. In 2015, 26 per cent of respondents were satisfied with social care services, a 5 percentage point drop from the previous year (also *see* Figure 6).

Figure 4 Satisfaction with GP, dentistry and social care services - very or quite satisfied, 1983 to 2015



Questions asked: 'From your own experience, or from what you have heard, please say how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with the way in which each of these parts of the National Health Service runs nowadays. First, local doctors or GPs?... National Health Service dentists?'

'And how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with social care provided by local authorities for people who cannot look after themselves because of illness, disability or old age?' (2012-15);

'From your own experience, or from what you have heard, please say how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with the services provided to people who need this kind of regular help with looking after themselves, whose family cannot provide it?' (2005, 2007)

GP and dentist questions not asked in 1984, 1985, 1988, 1992 and 1997

Social care questions not asked before 2005 or in 2006 and 2008-11

Source: King's Fund analysis of NatCen Social Research's British Social Attitudes survey data

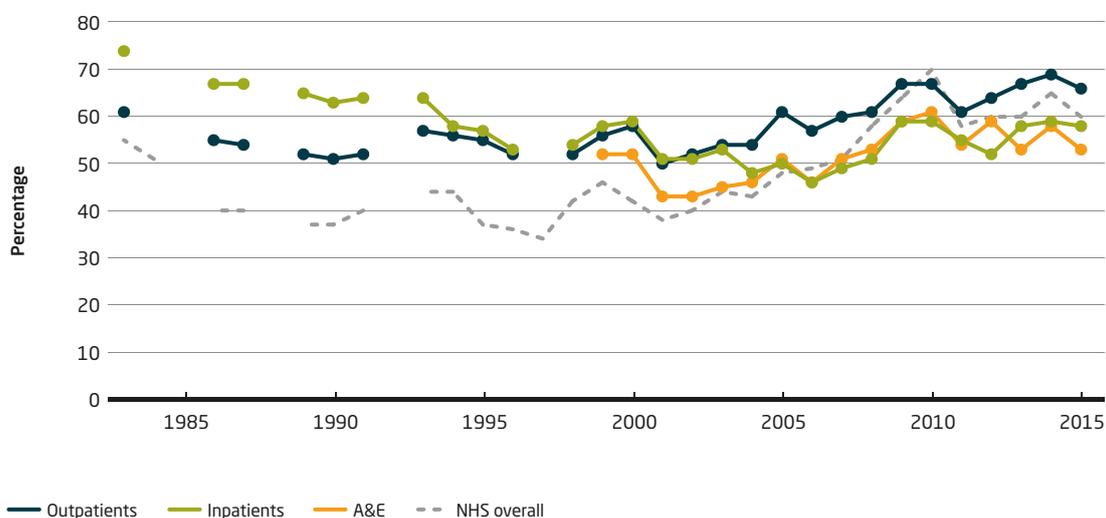
The BSA also asks respondents for their views on hospital-based services. In 2015, 66 per cent of people said they were satisfied with outpatient services, which is not statistically different from the previous year's level.

Satisfaction with inpatient services has remained statistically unchanged for the past three years and in 2015 was 58 per cent.

Public views on A&E services have fluctuated for the past few years and in 2015 satisfaction was 53 per cent, statistically unchanged from the previous year.

In very broad terms, public satisfaction with hospital services follows the same pattern as overall satisfaction with the NHS. As only a small proportion of the population has direct experience of hospital services each year, respondents are likely to be reflecting on a range of factors when answering these questions, many of which will also contribute to their overall levels of satisfaction.

Figure 5 Satisfaction with inpatient, outpatient and A&E services - very or quite satisfied, 1983 to 2015



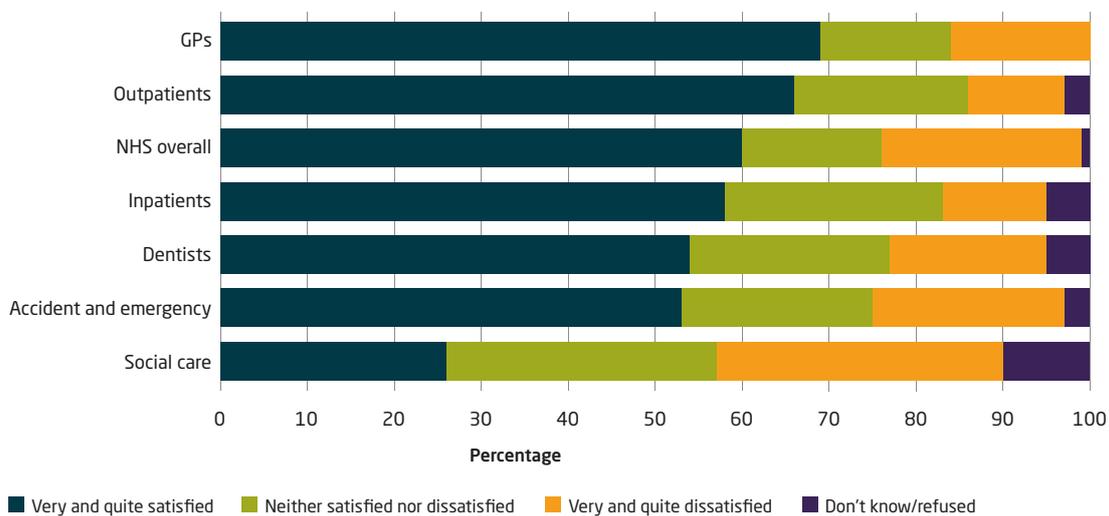
Questions asked: 'From your own experience, or from what you have heard, please say how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with the way in which each of these parts of the National Health Service runs nowadays... being in hospital as an inpatient?... attending hospital as an outpatient?... accident and emergency departments'

These questions were not asked in 1984, 1985, 1988, 1992 and 1997

Source: King's Fund analysis of NatCen Social Research's British Social Attitudes survey data

Figure 6 brings together public satisfaction data for health and social care services and the NHS overall in 2015. As in previous years, satisfaction with the social care services provided by local authorities was far lower than satisfaction with health care services.

Figure 6 Satisfaction with NHS and social care services, 2015



Questions asked: 'From your own experience, or from what you have heard, please say how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with the way in which each of these parts of the National Health Service runs nowadays. First, local doctors or GPs?... National Health Service dentists?... being in hospital as an inpatient?... attending hospital as an outpatient?... accident and emergency departments?'

'And how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with social care provided by local authorities for people who cannot look after themselves because of illness, disability or old age?'

Source: King's Fund analysis of NatCen Social Research's British Social Attitudes survey data

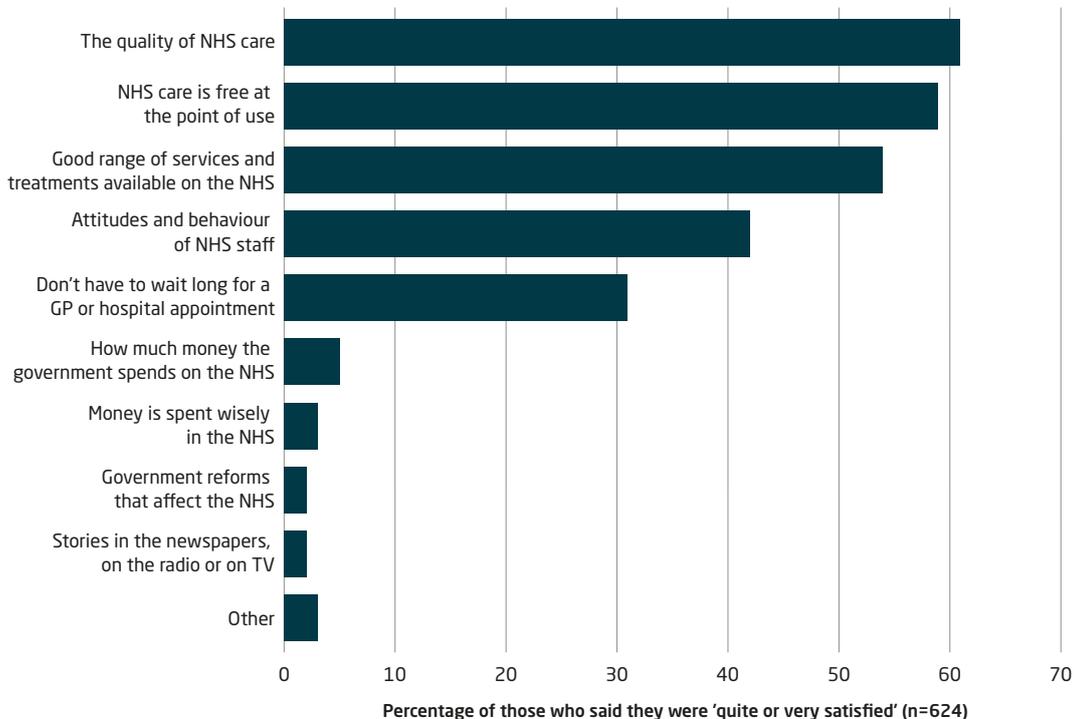
What drives public satisfaction?

In past years we have had to make educated guesses as to what lies behind the satisfaction ratings reported in the survey. For example, what are people actually thinking about when asked about their satisfaction with the way the National Health Service runs? Their past experiences of the NHS? Newspaper stories about the service? Or their general views about the government of the day? In 2015, for the first time, we included a set of follow-up questions that asked members of the public why they were satisfied or dissatisfied with the NHS overall. Respondents were given a list of options and asked to pick up to three. The charts below show the proportion of satisfied (Figure 7) and dissatisfied respondents (Figure 8) who selected each factor. As many respondents selected more than one factor, the percentages sum to more than 100.

The results show that public satisfaction is not a straightforward appraisal of NHS performance. It is a multi-faceted measure influenced by respondents' views on politics, policy and public institutions, as well as their experience of the NHS.

When the 60 per cent of respondents who said they were satisfied with the NHS in 2015 were asked to explain their views, five main factors emerged. Three of these can be characterised as different aspects of the quality of NHS care. The most commonly cited reason for satisfaction was indeed the quality of NHS care. But the attitudes and behaviour of NHS staff and, to a lesser extent, waiting times were also cited by many. It is also interesting to see that a majority of those saying they were satisfied with the NHS said this was because of the comprehensive range of services provided and that these were free at the point of use – a founding principle of the NHS.

Figure 7 Reasons for satisfaction with the NHS overall, 2015



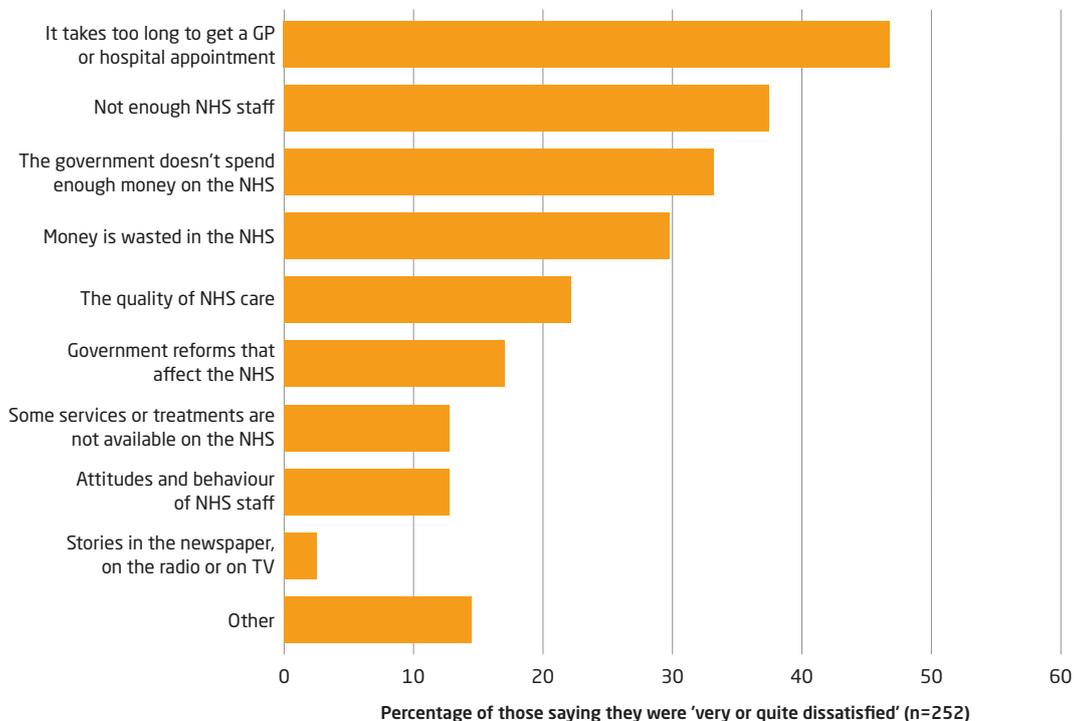
Question asked: 'You said you are satisfied with the way in which the National Health Service runs nowadays. Why do you say that? You can choose up to three answers.' (Options presented on a card).

This question was asked of a random 50 per cent of those who said they were 'quite' or 'very' satisfied with the way the NHS runs nowadays, n=624

Source: King's Fund analysis of NatCen Social Research's British Social Attitudes survey data

Dissatisfaction with the NHS reflects a different set of factors. For the 23 per cent of respondents who said they were very or quite dissatisfied, waiting times, staff shortages, underfunding and financial inefficiency were the top four reasons for dissatisfaction, with quality of care being cited by a quarter.

Figure 8 Reasons for dissatisfaction with the NHS overall, 2015



Question asked: 'You said you are dissatisfied with the way in which the National Health Service runs nowadays. Why do you say that? You can choose up to three answers.' (Options presented on a card).

This question was asked of a random 50 per cent of those who said they were 'quite' or 'very' dissatisfied with the way the NHS runs nowadays, n=252

Source: King's Fund analysis of NatCen Social Research's British Social Attitudes survey data

Very few respondents to either question said that stories in the newspapers, on the radio or on television influenced their attitudes. However, the impact of the media on satisfaction is likely to be more significant than these figures imply. It may be that people's perceptions of factors such as the NHS's financial position are to some degree influenced by the media, but that when answering this questionnaire they remember that perception rather than its source. The following box details the main health-related media stories during the fieldwork period for this survey.

Media coverage of the NHS: July-October 2015

The NHS had a high profile during the general election campaign and this continued into the months when the field work for the British Social Attitudes survey was conducted. There were a number of stories reported but the most significant were as follows.

Issues concerning the performance of the NHS dominated the headlines, including stories on the difficulty of getting a timely GP appointment.

Media coverage also included the Secretary of State for Health's pledge to make the NHS a seven-day service. This linked to stories on higher weekend mortality rates and the ongoing dispute about junior doctors' contracts.

Pressures on social care services were also covered extensively when the government announced a delay (until 2020) in changes to social care funding arrangements recommended by Andrew Dilnot. Warnings of an imminent social care crisis followed.

Towards the end of the BSA survey period, Addenbrooke's Hospital was put into special measures and its chief executive resigned.

Finally, figures published by Monitor and the NHS Trust Development Authority highlighted large deficits among NHS providers, and media stories focused on the financial pressures facing the NHS ahead of the Spending Review.

Conclusion

The British Social Attitudes survey data on public satisfaction with the NHS is often used by politicians, policy-makers and the media as a measure of NHS performance. Growing satisfaction is heralded as a success for the NHS and the party in power, while declining satisfaction is used as ammunition against those running the service.

Findings from new questions in the 2015 survey show that public satisfaction cannot be interpreted as a straightforward indicator of NHS performance. The relatively high levels of satisfaction reported in 2015 in part reflect positive views on the quality and range of services available on the NHS, but also reflect public support for the concept of a publicly run health service free at the point of use and providing a comprehensive range of services. Dissatisfaction was most often explained by views about waiting times, and a lack of financial and staff resources followed by concerns about inefficiencies in the NHS and the quality of care. Interestingly, the second and third of these reasons for dissatisfaction do not imply a dislike of the NHS, but a desire for it to be better resourced.

Methodology

NatCen Social Research's British Social Attitudes survey has been conducted almost every year since 1983. Overall, just under 100,000 people have taken part. A selection of health and social care-related questions – including those on satisfaction reported here – has been funded by The King's Fund since 2011. Other funders sponsor other questions on a variety of topics.

Sample and approach

The 2015 survey consisted of 4,328 interviews with a representative sample of adults in England, Scotland and Wales. Addresses are selected at random and visited by one of NatCen Social Research's interviewers. After selecting (again at random) one adult (aged 18 and over) at the address, the interviewer carries out an hour-long interview. The participant answers most questions by selecting an answer from a set of cards.

The sample size for the overall NHS satisfaction question reported here was 2,167 in 2015; for questions about satisfaction with other NHS services the sample size was 1,062. The data is weighted to correct for the unequal probabilities of selection, and for biases caused by differential non-response. The weighted sample is calibrated to match the population in terms of age, sex and region. The margin of error in 2015 for the health care questions was around +/- 1.8 to 3.5 percentage points.

The majority of field work for the 2015 survey was conducted between July and October, with a small number of interviews taking place in November.

Topics

The topics covered by the survey change from year to year, depending on the identities and interests of its funders. Some questions are asked every year, some every couple of years and some less frequently.

Funding

The survey is funded by a range of charitable and government sources, which

change from year to year. The survey is led by NatCen Social Research. NatCen carries out research in the fields of social and public policy, uncovering the truth about people's lives and what they think about the issues that affect them. As an independent, not-for-profit organisation, NatCen focuses its time and energy on meeting clients' needs and delivering social research that works for society.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Eleanor Taylor and Ian Simpson from NatCen for their assistance with data analysis and to our King's Fund colleagues Chris Ham, Richard Murray, Cara Phillips and Patrick South for comments on earlier drafts of this report. Most importantly we would like to thank members of the British public for the time they took to complete this survey and for providing us with this fascinating dataset.

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