

Exclusive: Lib Dem MPs disagree with Conservatives on health policy reform

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Liberal Democrat MPs are more closely aligned with Labour than with Conservatives on health policy, new research into MPs' opinions on the NHS reveals.

As the Health and Social Care Bill progresses through Parliament, it appears that MPs are split along traditional party lines on issues like GP commissioning and outsourcing to the private sector.

The research, commissioned by Westminster Advisers - a public affairs consultancy - and conducted by ComRes, shows that while 90% of Conservative MPs agree that "GPs should be able to turn to the private sector for administrative assistance with their new commissioning responsibilities", just 26% Labour MPs and 34% of Liberal Democrat MPs agree with this statement.

Similar splits emerged on issues such as whether the NHS should provide non-essential operations and services, whether taxpayer funded health services should be delivered by the private sector and patient top ups.

ComRes surveyed 151 MPs between 15 October and 12 November 2010 by self-completion postal questionnaire and online. Data was weighted to reflect the exact composition of the House of Commons in terms of party representation and regional constituency distribution.

On the issue of health service outsourcing, nearly half (48%) of all MPs agree that "as long as services remain funded by taxpayers and are free at the point of use, the NHS should outsource more of its work to the private sector". However, this breaks down as 84%, of Conservatives, 24% of Liberal Democrats and only 12% of Labour MPs.

The research shows that more than half (55%) of all MPs support the idea that "patients on the NHS should be allowed to 'top up' their care by paying for additional treatment privately without being forced to pay the full cost". However, while 85% of Conservatives agree, just 54% of Liberal Democrats and only a fifth (21%) of Labour MPs agree.

The only area where all three parties were in broad agreement was that decisions about outsourcing of care should be made primarily on the basis of quality and not cost. Labour MPs place the most emphasis on quality, with 84% agreeing that "decisions on outsourcing NHS treatments to the private sector should primarily be made on the basis of quality of care, not cost". Nonetheless nearly three quarters (73%) of Lib Dem MPs, and nearly two thirds (61%) of Conservative MPs also agree or agree strongly with this statement.

Dominic Church, managing director of Westminster Advisers said: "Our research shows that the landscape for health service providers is changing rapidly but that MP thinking on health remains divided along party lines. The challenge for health

services providers is to communicate the value of their services in an evolving market place.”

Tom Black, head of healthcare research at ComRes, said: “At a time of great change for the NHS, there is a clear division within Westminster between those who believe the private sector’s role within the health service should increase, and those who do not. That division seems to be largely focused on traditional party political distinctions, and not along the lines of the coalition’s ‘New Politics’.”

The research report is being launched by Westminster Advisers on 8th February at a roundtable event chaired by Alastair McLellan HSJ Editor featuring a keynote presentation by Mark Simmonds MP, Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Health.

More information is available at :