



Public First Education Polling - General Election 2024

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At Public First we specialise in the intersection between policy, politics, and public opinion. Though education won't drive the outcome on 4th July, whoever wins is going to inherit a system which has both empirically improved in many ways since 2010, and has also got undeniable and increasingly urgent issues which need to be addressed.

Education has been pretty sparsely discussed in the campaign to date. But, we want to know what the policies that the parties have announced - and in a couple of instances, what we think they may be thinking about - sound like to voters. To do this, we ran a nationally representative poll of 2011 UK adults looking at what they like, what they don't like, and what their priority for further change would be. We think this is the most in-depth analysis of voters' priorities for education at the election yet produced.

The most interesting results come from when we asked those being surveyed to compare policies, using a technique called MaxDiff. In this question, we showed each poll respondent a randomly chosen pair of policy commitments from a list of twenty which we arranged, and we asked them to choose which one they most like, and least like. By doing random pairings for each respondent, you can end up with a ranked list - which ones are relatively popular and not popular, but also the extent to which they are much more so, or much less so. We didn't tell respondents which party had made which commitment, so as not to skew the results.

In most instances, we took our policy commitments from announcements parties have made in the past, given that manifestos had not been published when our poll went into the field. We've tried to use the parties' own wording wherever possible, only shrinking in an effort to make them quickly readable in a poll. All errors of interpretation are our own.

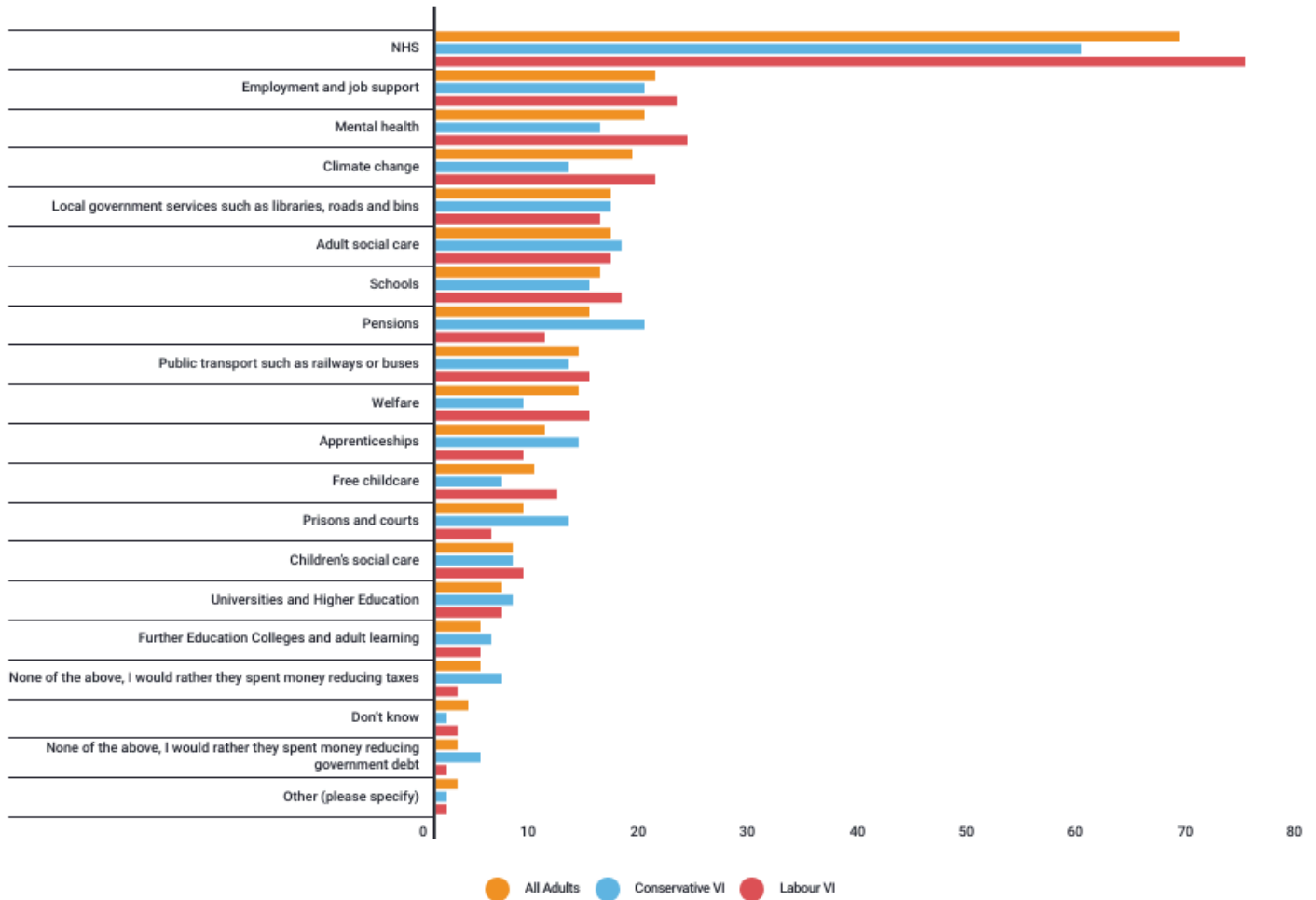
As well as this, you can see that we asked a number of questions around voters' satisfaction with different aspects of the education system since 2010, and - voting intention notwithstanding - whether they have confidence in each of those aspects getting better over the next period of time.

And we asked - if a future chancellor finds a magic money tree growing in the back garden of No11 Downing Street, what should they spend money on, within education?

The second half of our analysis, coming later this week once all manifestos are out, will focus less on politics and public opinion, and more on policy. We will take the specific commitments made, and explore their implementation - and what we think this may mean in practice for the winning party.

1. **Education isn't at the front of the queue.** When we asked about priorities for government spending, education was not a top priority. 68% of respondents said they wanted more spending on the NHS, and school spending was the seventh-most popular choice on 15%. Spending on FE colleges only outranked reducing taxes and reducing government debt with 4%, and HE spending was barely better with 6%. Although 13% of those intending to vote Conservative saw spending on apprenticeships as a priority, this shrank to 8% of those intending to vote Labour. [[Chart One](#)]

Imagine that the government elected after the General Election pledges to spend more money on public services in England. Which of the following would you want to see any additional money being spent on? Select up to three.

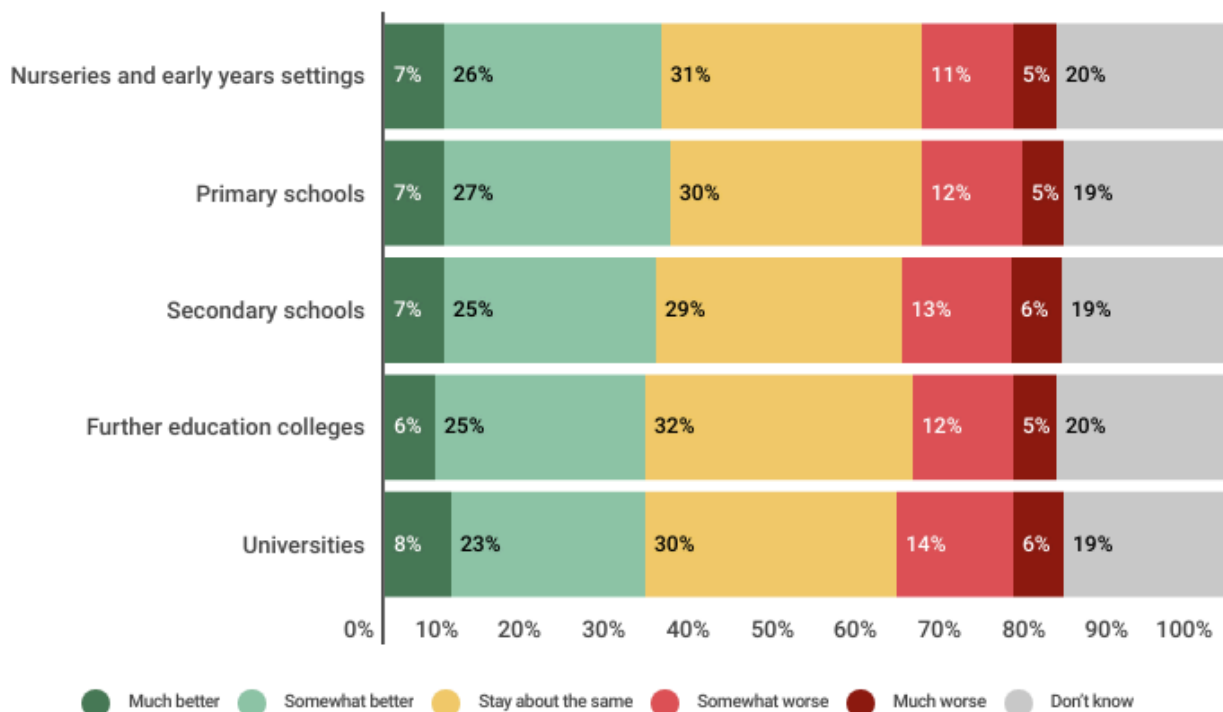


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2. **Things can only get better** - 42% think secondary schools have got worse since 2010. More people thought secondary schools had got somewhat worse (26%) or much worse (16%) than said the same about any other phase of the education sector. Only 15% of respondents thought that secondary schools had got better, with 27% thinking they had stayed about the same. There was no majority for **any** phase of the education sector being seen as better since 2010, although 49% thought that nurseries and early years settings had got better or stayed about the same. [Chart Two]

Do you think the general quality of the following educational institutions in England will get better, worse, or stay about the same over the next 10 years?

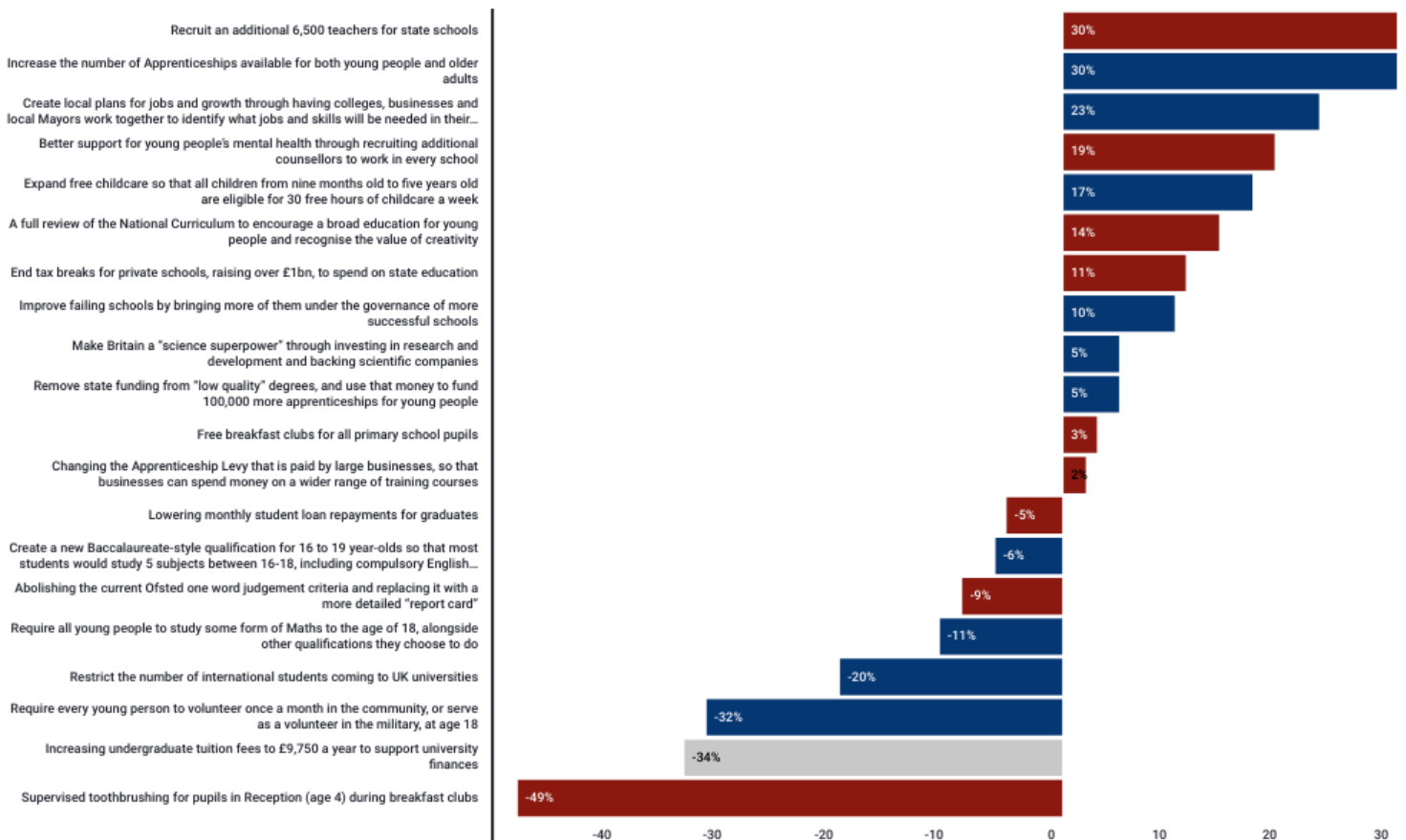


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3. **Teachers on top:** In our MaxDiff analysis Labour’s pledge to recruit 6,500 new teachers is the joint most popular education pledge yet made in the election, with a total of 30% net positive in our MaxDiff analysis. It polled better with older respondents, scoring net positive 35% among respondents aged 36-54 and net positive 39% among those over 55. It is cross party - it held similar appeal for those who voted Conservative (28%) and Labour (33%) in 2019, and was still the second most popular policy after increasing the number of apprenticeships among respondents without children. All in all, you can see why this made it onto Labour’s pledge card. [[Chart Three](#)]

Imagine a political party was deciding upon spending priorities for the country. Looking at the 4 policies below, which would you most like to see a political party implement, and which would you least like to see?

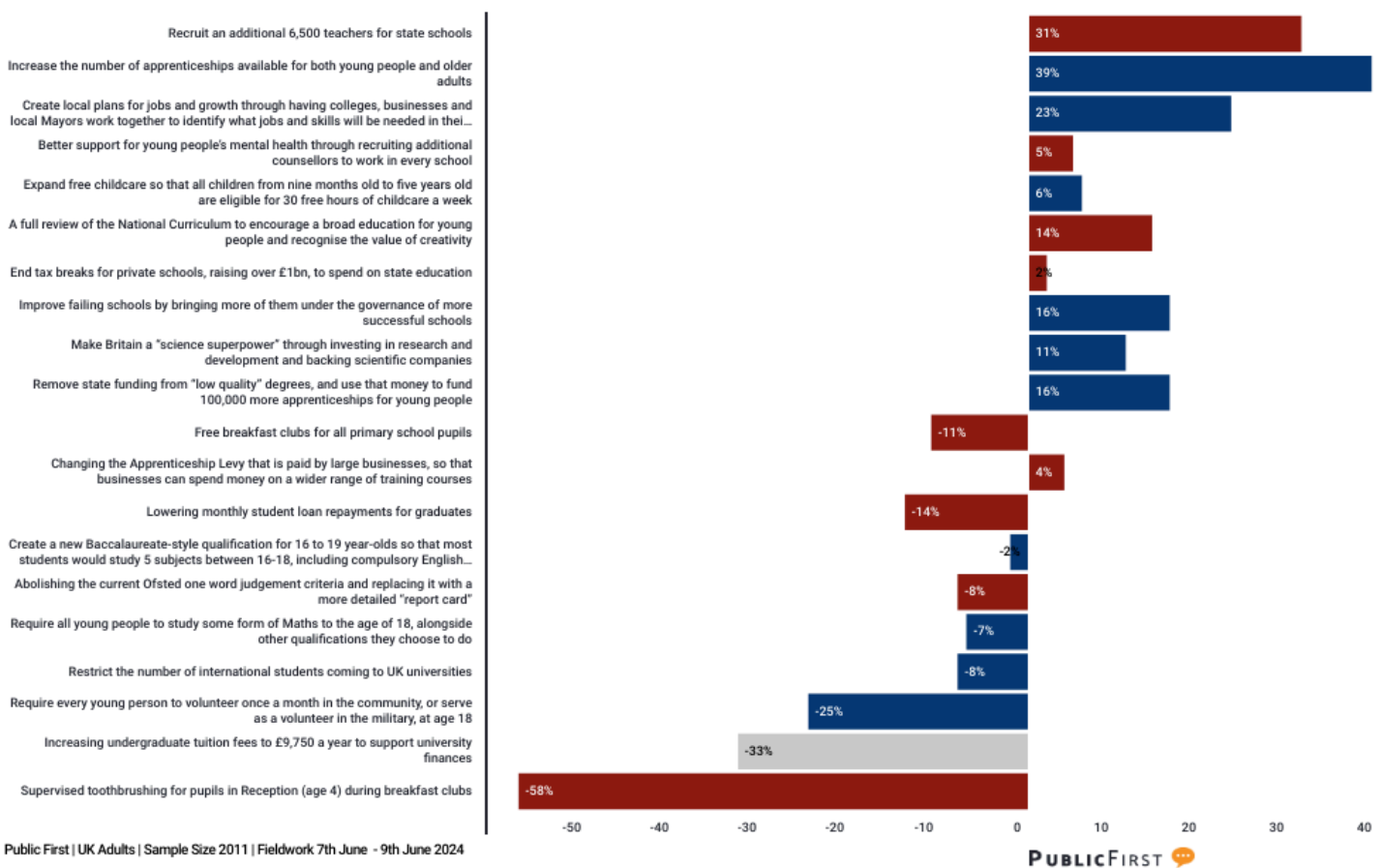



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4. **Apprenticeships for all:** increasing the number of apprenticeships available for both young people and older adults came joint top and actually scored higher amongst swing voters. Furthermore, when we asked people for a hypothetical spending commitment for post-18 education in England, more apprenticeships was also the most popular, with 44% saying that it should be prioritised. This feeling was stronger among respondents intending to vote Conservative (50%) and also rose with age: only 28% of 18-24-year-old respondents said it should be a priority, but this rose to 60% among respondents over 65. [[Chart Four](#)]

Imagine a political party was deciding upon spending priorities for the country. Looking at the 4 policies below, which would you most like to see a political party implement, and which would you least like to see? SWING VOTERS ONLY



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5. **No to the nanny state:** Labour's plans for supervised toothbrushing bomb, making it by far the least popular policy we tested. The commitment achieved a net score of -47%, (-46% among labour voters) which rose to -58% among those intending to vote Reform and current swing voters, -59% among parents whose children are not of school age, and -62% among respondents over 55. [[Chart Three](#)]

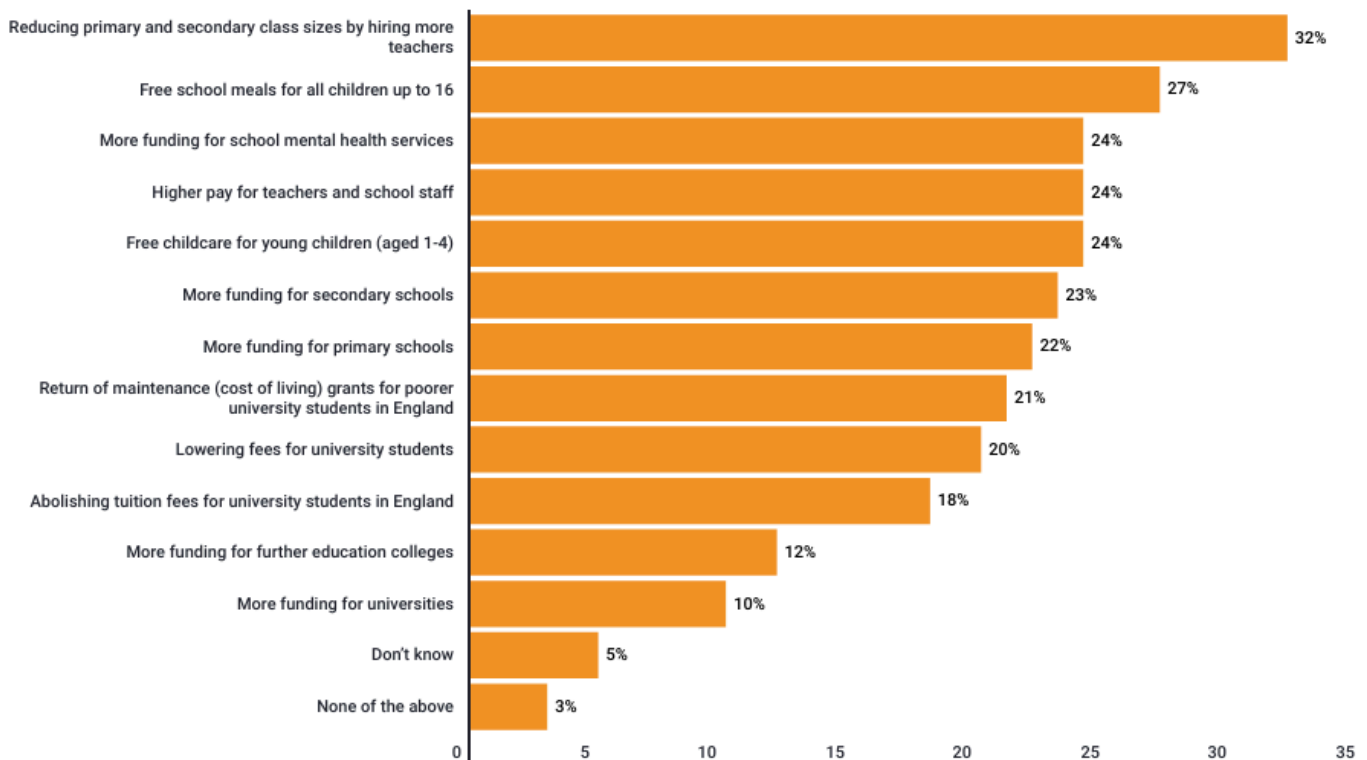
 6. **Increasing tuition fees is less popular than national service:** After supervised toothbrushing, national service and raising tuition fees were the least popular policy options polled. Respondents divided sharply by voting intention, with national service scoring -3% among those intending to vote Conservative but -44% among those intending to vote Labour and -41% among those intending to vote Lib Dem, for an overall score of -32%. However, increasing tuition fees by even a small amount to a hypothetical £9,750 a year - which isn't actually anyone's stated policy, but something we think may be being considered - polled poorly across voter intentions, scoring -29% among those intending to vote Conservative, -33% among those intending to vote Labour, -34% among those intending to vote Lib Dem and -28% among those intending to vote Reform. If any government wants to do this, they're going to have to accept it won't be popular (however necessary it may be). [[Chart Three](#)]

 7. **Further restrictions on number of international students is also low priority:** There was limited demand for restrictions on the number of international students coming to UK universities, with the proposal scoring -20% in our MaxDiff analysis. It was a significant priority for those intending to vote for Reform, among whom it scored 22%. However, it scored -29% among those intending to vote for Labour, and only -11% among those intending to vote Tory. It was more popular among non-grads than grads: it scored -11% among the former but -34% among the latter. [[Chart Three](#)]

 8. **If the magic money tree blooms, the public want new cash to go to schools:** Reducing primary and secondary class sizes is what the public wants to see parties spend money on - followed by universal free school meals, and funding for mental health services. 32% of respondents listed reducing primary and secondary class sizes by hiring more teachers as a priority, but this rose to 46% among those over the age of 65. Its popularity was consistent across gender, social groups and education levels. Free school meals for all children up to 16 was a priority for 27% of respondents, with the policy the most common priority for respondents from the North East (37%), the North West (35%) and Scotland (31%). Behind these two ideas comes more funding for school mental health services (24%), which is a particular priority for Conservative to Labour switchers (33%). [[Chart Five](#)]



Imagine a political party had decided to spend more money on education in England. Which, if any, of the following areas do you think should be prioritised? Please select up to three.



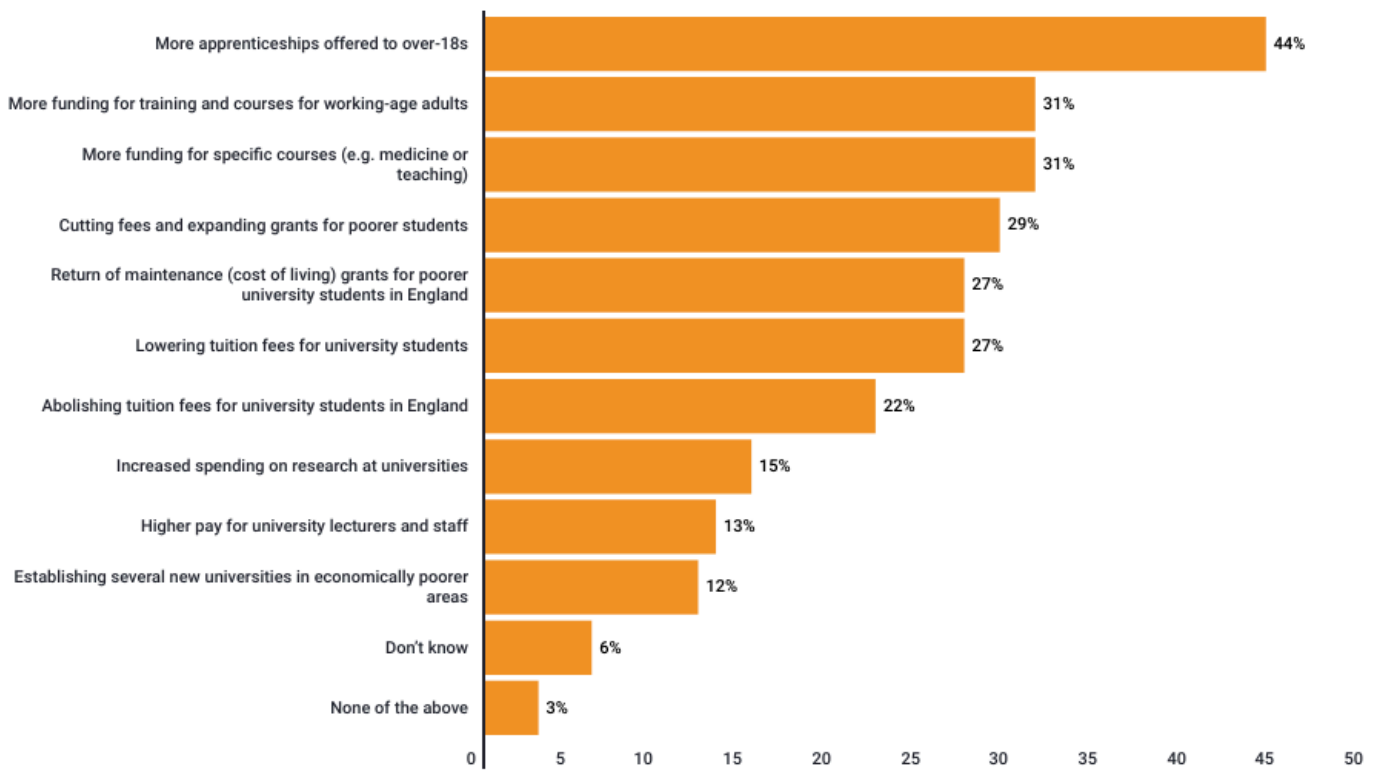
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9. **More funding for universities comes bottom of the list:** Only 10% of respondents listed more funding for universities as a priority. This rose to 17% for those with a postgraduate degree and 16% for those who live in urban or city centre environments, and was a priority for at least 13% of respondents across all income bands above £70,000. There was much more sympathy for reducing fees, and reintroducing maintenance loans - indicating that people want to see support go to students rather than to institutions. The figure for FE colleges was slightly higher, with 12% listing it as a priority. It was a very low priority among those switching away from the Conservative party, with only 3% of Conservative-to-Reform switchers listing it as a priority. No age bracket above 45 years old saw more than 5% of respondents listing it as a priority. [\[Chart Five\]](#)

10. On post-18 education people would like to see more apprenticeships and more training: Nearly half (44%) listed apprenticeships as a priority area for post-18 education spending, a figure that rose to 50% among those intending to vote Conservative and undecided voters. It was more popular with those who have had lower levels of education, with 46% of those educated to GCSE level declaring it a priority compared to just 38% of those with postgraduate degrees. Training and courses for working-age adults were roughly as popular as more funding for specific courses, such as medicine or teaching: both were declared a priority by 31% of respondents. However, working-age training was more popular among those intending to vote Conservative (37%) than Labour (31%). [[Chart Six](#)]

Imagine a political party had decided to spend more money specifically on post-18 education in England. Which, if any, of the following areas do you think should be prioritised? Please select up to three.



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