Social care in UK public discourse

14

CASS

Corpus Approaches
to Social Science

Contents

About CASS...

The ESRC-funded Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Science (CASS) is a research centre based at Lancaster University which aims to bring the methods and benefits of the corpus approach to other disciplines.

From the Centre Director

The corpus approach harnesses the power of computers to allow analysts to work to produce machine aided analyses of large bodies of language data - so-called *corpora*. Computers allow us to do this on a scale and with a depth that would typically defy analysis by hand and eye alone.

In doing so, we gain unprecedented insights into the use and manipulation of language in society. The centre's work is generating such insights into a range of important social issues like climate change, hate crime and education. This series of briefings aims to spread the social impact and benefits of the work being done by the centre and, in so doing, encourage others to use our methods in future.

Professor Elena Semino

This research was commissioned by #socialcarefuture – 'a growing movement of people with a shared commitment to bring about major positive change in what is currently called "social care."' This positive change centrally involves re-framing public discussions about social care in ways that are conducive to humane and sustainable solutions. In turn, this requires as good an understanding as possible of how social care is currently framed in public discourse. This project aimed to provide a systematic account of current framings by applying corpus linguistic methods to the analysis of representations of social care in the UK press in the period 2017-2019, and in tweets and political party materials produced during the 2019 General Election campaign.

Key research questions

General research question:

How is social care represented in (a) the UK press and (b) tweets and party political materials produced during the 2019 General Election campaign?

Specific research questions for each dataset:

- How frequently is social care talked about?
- What themes are associated with social care?
- What groups of people are associated with social care?
- How were the different groups of people represented?

This research involved the collection of an amount of textual data that was too large to be analysed manually:

- All articles containing the phrase 'social care' published between 19th June 2017 and 31st March 2019 in eight UK national newspapers (*The Express, The Guardian, The Independent, The Mail, The Mirror, The Telegraph, The Times* and *The Sun*), for a total of 5,500 articles and over five million words.

- The party manifestos and leaders' speeches delivered to launch the campaigns and manifestos for the 2019 UK General Election by the three the main political parties in England: Labour, Conservative, and Liberal Democrats (LibDems), for a total of 75,600 words.

- All tweets posted between 27th Oct 2019 and 14th Dec 2019 that contained one or more of the following terms: 'social care', 'free personal care', #socialcare or #freepersonalcare (NB: the phrase 'free personal care' was proposed by the Labour Party) – for a total of approximately 900 tweets and 35,500 words.

Corpus linguistic methods make it possible to analyse the data both quantitatively (for example, by using tailor-made software tools identify the words that tend to occur around 'social care') and qualitatively (by looking at the use of selected instances of 'social care' in context). Our main findings are provided below.

1. 'Broadsheet' newspapers talk about social care more often than 'tabloid' newspapers

We divided the eight national newspapers into 'broadsheets' (*The Guardian, The Independent, The Telegraph, The Times*) and 'tabloids' (*The Express, The Mail, The Mirror, The Sun*). Our search for articles containing 'social care' in the period between 19th June 2017 and 31st March 2019 identified 3,939 texts published by broadsheet newspapers (4,180,855 words) and 1,589 texts published by tabloids (837,731 words).

2. The press present social care as a system in crisis and a burden on the NHS

In the first phase of our study, we used a tailor-made software tool to identify the top 20 words which were commonly found in close proximity to 'social care' in the corpus (known as 'collocates'; see Table 1), and the top 50 most distinctive words in the data (known as 'keywords'; see Table 2).

Table 1: The company that 'social care' keeps in the UK press: top 20 collocates in a window 5 words to the left and 5 words to the right of 'social care'

Rank	Word	Rank	Word	Rank	Word	Rank	Word
1	health	6	department	11	reform	16	paper
2	adult	7	NHS	12	budgets	17	integration
3	funding	8	children's	13	cuts	18	hunt
4	crisis	9	services	14	he	19	sustainable
5	system	10	costs	15	fund	20	she

Table 2: Distinctive vocabulary in UK articles that mention 'social care': the top 20 'keywords' in the corpus, organised by theme

	General	Collective Actors	Individual Actors
POLITICAL	Brexit, sector, election, deal, system, manifesto,	government, councils, EU, Tory, public, cabinet, MPs, Tories	Theresa, secretary, May's, minister, Hammond, Jeremy, chancellor, Hunt, Corbyn,
FINANCIAL	funding, pay, tax, budget, spending, cuts, austerity, financial		
MEDICAL	health, service, dementia, mental, homes, hospital, healthcare	NHS, patients, staff, hospitals, nurses	
PUBLIC/SOCIETY		workers, elderly, public	
THREAT	crisis, needs, winter		

The main themes emerging from the two Tables are: politics (e.g. 'government'), finance (e.g. 'funding'), health (e.g. 'NHS'), societal groups (e.g. 'elderly') and, more generally, the idea of a societal threat (e.g. 'crisis').

- **Social care as a system in crisis**

Social care is framed as a system in crisis due to increasing demand (particularly as a consequence of longer life expectancy) and decreasing resources (particularly financial resources).

> *URGENT action is needed to tackle chronic underfunding and a staffing crisis in social care, a report warns.* (Daily Mirror, 08.02.2018)

> *Age UK has warned that 1.2 million older people in the UK have unmet social care needs.* (The Independent, 09.05.2018)

A sense of crisis is also conveyed by the metaphors associated with social care. For example, social care is described as a 'time bomb' and a 'black hole', with associated costs 'spiralling' or 'sky-rocketing'.

- **Social care as a burden on the NHS**

Social care is framed as an additional burden on an already overstretched National Health Service, particularly because of older people having to be cared for in hospitals due to lack of social care provision in the community.

> *Social care bosses have written to the prime minister urging her to invest at least £1bn to stave off a growing crisis in services for elderly and disabled people and relieve pressure on the NHS.* (The Guardian, 16.06.2018)

The programme [BBC Two's documentary Hospital] reveals that across the health trust there are the equivalent of four full wards of patients fit enough to be discharged, but needing supported care in the community. (Sunday Express, 18.03.2018)

3. Tabloid newspaper primarily focus on older people as users of social care services; the broadsheets less so

We searched for references to three age groups – older people, adults, and children – and considered references to people with physical impairment, learning disabilities and/or autism as a separate group, irrespective of age. These groups were identified through the following set of terms:

- **older people:** 'elderly', 'older people/person'; 'old people'; 'old age';
- **adults:** 'adult(s)';
- **children:** 'child', 'children'.
- **people with physical impairment, learning disabilities and/or autism:** 'disabled', 'disabilities', 'disability', 'with special/complex needs', 'with autism', 'autistic';

(**NB:** For adults and children, we only considered occurrences specifically related to social care, thus excluding references to, for example, poverty, online abuse or domestic violence.)

Older people were the most frequently mentioned group both in the broadsheets and in the tabloids (Figures 1 and 2), but the tabloids mentioned older people much more frequently than any other group. In the broadsheets, there was also emphasis on 'people with physical impairment, learning disabilities and/or autism'.

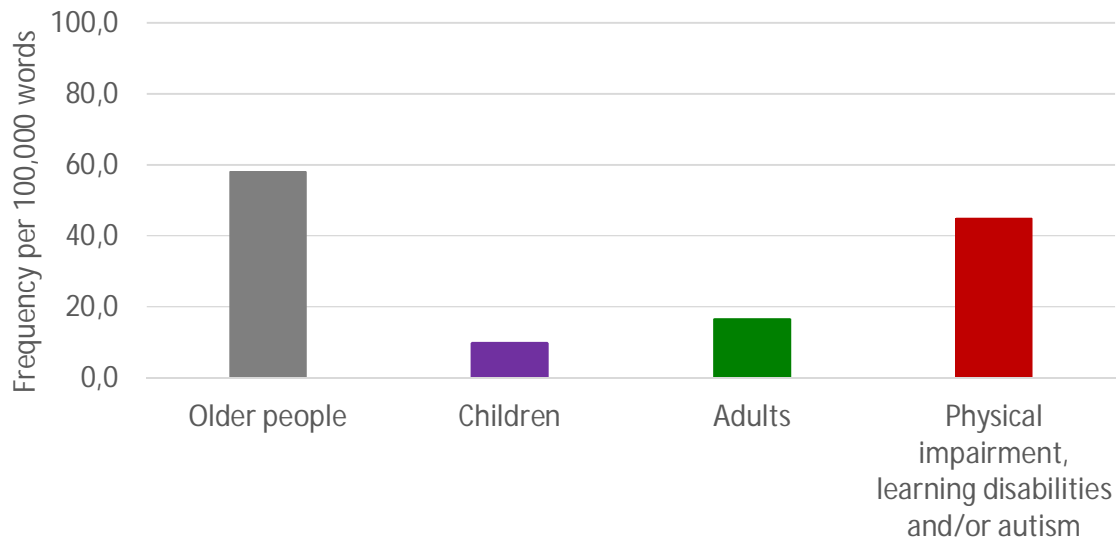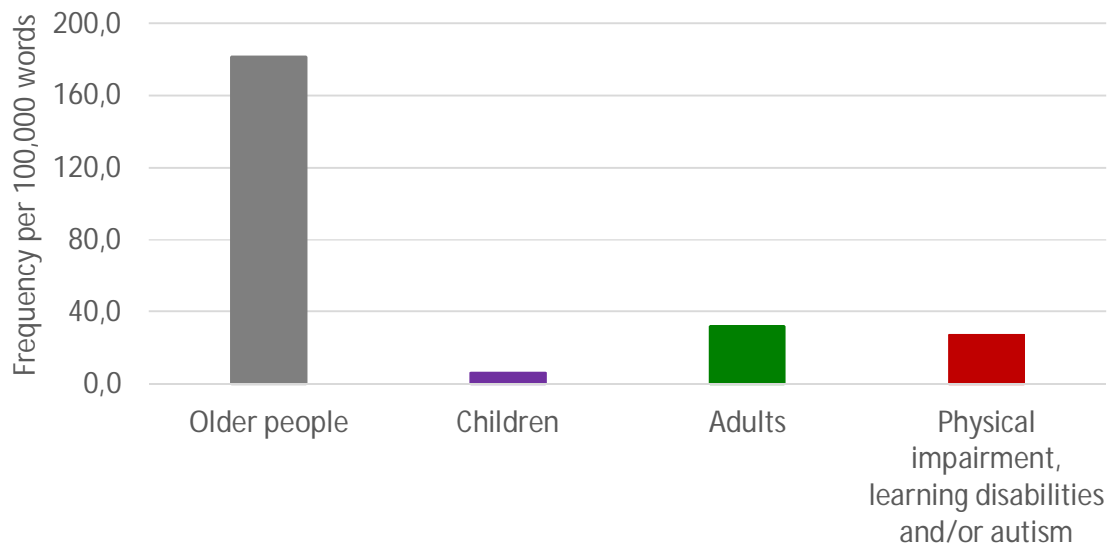*Figure 1: Mentions of social groups in the broadsheet newspapers*

Figure 2: Mentions of social groups in the tabloids

Older people are presented both as the cause of problems in the social care system and as victims of deficiencies in the system:

Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt today throws his weight behind a controversial NHS tax' to tackle the time bomb of how to pay for elderly people in care. (Mail on Sunday, 25.03.2018)

Without lasting reform, the most vulnerable frail and elderly people are at real risk of falling through the gaps and not getting the support they expect - and deserve. (The Independent, 31.08.2017)

4. The press presents social care users are vulnerable people

The salient frequency of the word 'vulnerable' in both corpora (25 per 100,000 words in the broadsheet newspapers and 46 instances per 100,000 words in the tabloids) points towards the reproduction of the stereotypical representation of a social care service user as a vulnerable person in need of much care.

This especially applies to older people, young adults and children, as indicated by the high co-occurrence of 'vulnerable' and various words referring to these social groups. The figures below show the top collocates of 'vulnerable' in the broadsheet newspapers (Figure 3) and in the tabloids (Figure 4) – cf. 'elderly', 'older', 'residents' (of care homes), 'pensioners', 'adults' and 'children'.

Figure 3: Top collocates of
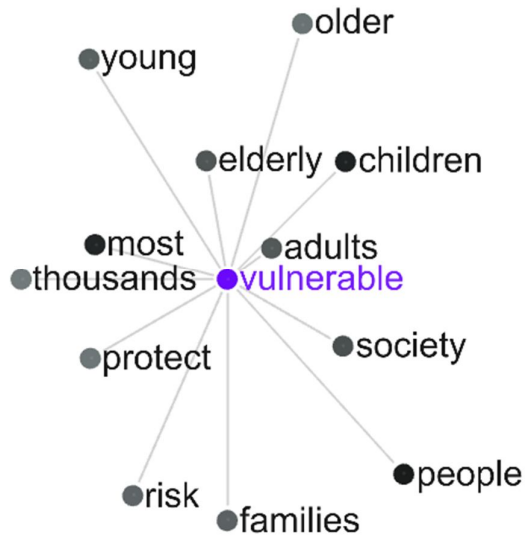'vulnerable' in broadsheet
newspapers

Figure 4 : Top collocates of
'vulnerable' in the tabloids

5. Different newspapers link problems with social care with different issues, depending on their own broader ideological slant

A comparison of word frequencies across the data drawn from different newspapers revealed that, for example, The Guardian linked problems in the social care system with the consequences of Brexit:

She says Brexit has only served to deepen a pre-existing staffing crisis in social care as a number of EU nationals elect to return to their country of origin. (The Guardian, July 5, 2017)

In contrast, the Express used the idea of a social care crisis to support its campaign for a reduction in foreign aid:

> *It is time our government stopped this foreign aid madness and spent our money at home on the NHS, adult social care and our elderly, who have sacrificed so much for us.* (The Express, 7/1/2018)

Social care in the 2019 General Election

6. **Social care received very little attention in the 2019 General Election campaign, especially as compared with the NHS and Brexit**

None of the **party leaders** used the phrases 'social care' or 'free personal care' in their speeches when launching the campaign or the manifestos.

Social care is featured in all three **party manifestos**, but it was mentioned much less frequently than the NHS and Brexit, a difference that was especially evident in the **Conservative** manifesto (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Relative frequency of the words 'social care', 'NHS' and 'Brexit' in the manifestos
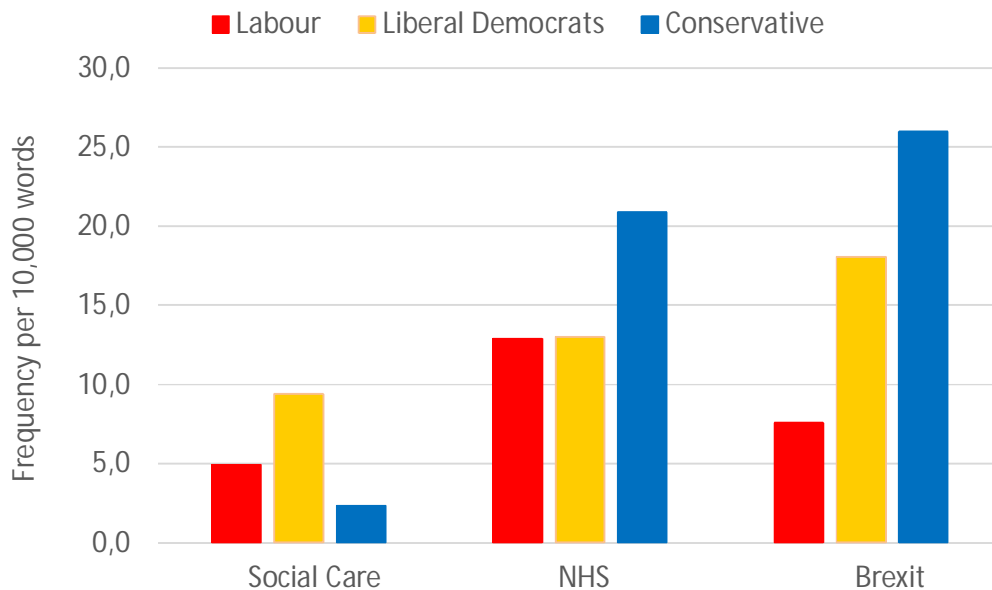
In addition, the analysis of all material for the three political parties found no evidence of what could be described as a positive vision for social care. This became especially evident in the manifestos when we contrasted descriptions of social care with descriptions the NHS, which are overwhelmingly positive:

Labour: *The National Health Service is one of Labour's proudest achievements.*

Conservative: *The NHS represents the best of this country.*

The number of **tweets** about social care we identified via the Software tool FireAnt during the election campaign is surprisingly low – only 897. For the sake of comparison, we used the same software, the same method and the same time period to collect tweets that included:

(i) either the word 'NHS' or the hashtag #NHS;
(ii) either the word 'Brexit' or the hashtag #Brexit.

The overall numbers of **tweets** about the NHS and about Brexit were much higher than those about social care (see Figure 6). In addition, a large proportion of tweets were from accounts connected with the Labour Party, e.g. @UKLabour and @jeremycorbyn.
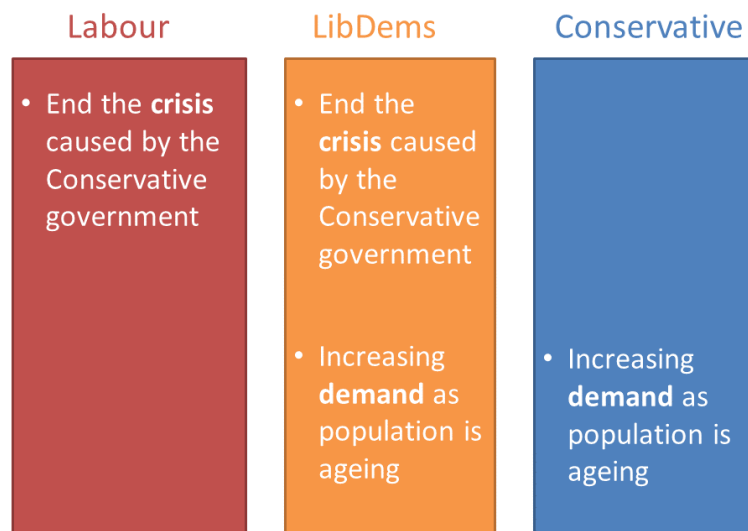
Figure 6: Total number of tweets about social care, NHS and Brexit
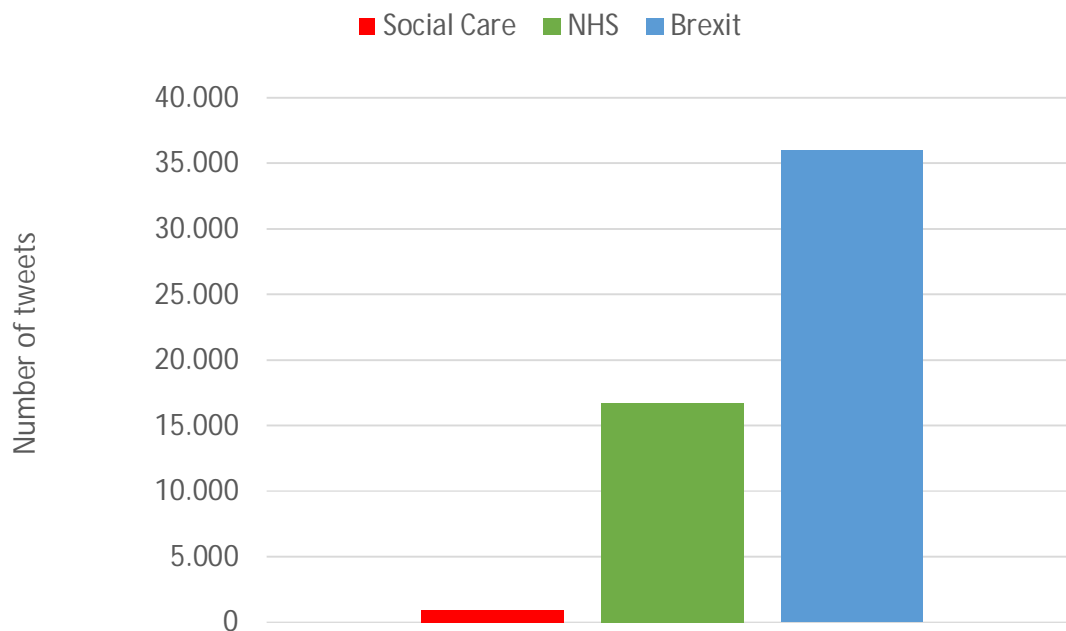
7. **All three political parties presented social care as a system in crisis (but for different reasons), and promised extra funding**

All three manifestos characterise social care as either in crisis or under pressure, albeit attributing this to different causes (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Reasons why the social care system is in a crisis, as mentioned in the manifestos

Labour	LibDems	Conservative
• End the **crisis** caused by the Conservative government	• End the **crisis** caused by the Conservative government • Increasing **demand** as population is ageing	• Increasing **demand** as population is ageing

Labour and the **LibDems** stressed that investments in social care are urgently needed to end the crisis resulting from long-term cuts in funding by the Conservative government. The **Conservatives**, in contrast, did not make any reference to a social care crisis, but argued that the system is under pressure because of the demands of an ageing population, an argument also used by the **LibDems**.

All three manifestos proposed extra funding to improve the quality of services and ensure that people have access to the care services they need. However, their proposals were fundamentally different.

Labour's and the **LibDems'** proposals coincided in general terms (Figure 8). Both proposed to make services more efficient by reforming the current Health and Social Care Act and bringing health and care services more closely together. They nevertheless differed with regard to specific aspects of their proposals. **Labour** made a case for free personal care for older people whereas the **LibDems** focused on mental health.

*Figure 8: The parties' proposals for investing in social care*

Labour	LibDems	Conservative
• Integrate health and social care services	• Integrate health and social care services	
• Provide free personal care for the elderly	• Improve mental health services	
• Create a National Care Service	• Move towards a single budget for health and social care	
• Look after people with disabilities	• Build a cross-party convention	• Build a cross-party convention

Both the **Conservatives** and the **LibDems** proposed to call a cross-party convention to achieve long-term solutions. However, the **LibDems** suggested bringing together government and the public from across all UK member countries to discuss solutions, whereas the **Conservatives** did not specify how the process would work, only stating that they would consider a wide range of options.

8. On Twitter, social care was presented as a system in crisis, and connected with other pressing problems

Figure 9 below shows the top collocates of 'social care' in the Twitter data.

Figure 9: Top collocates of 'social care' in the Twitter data
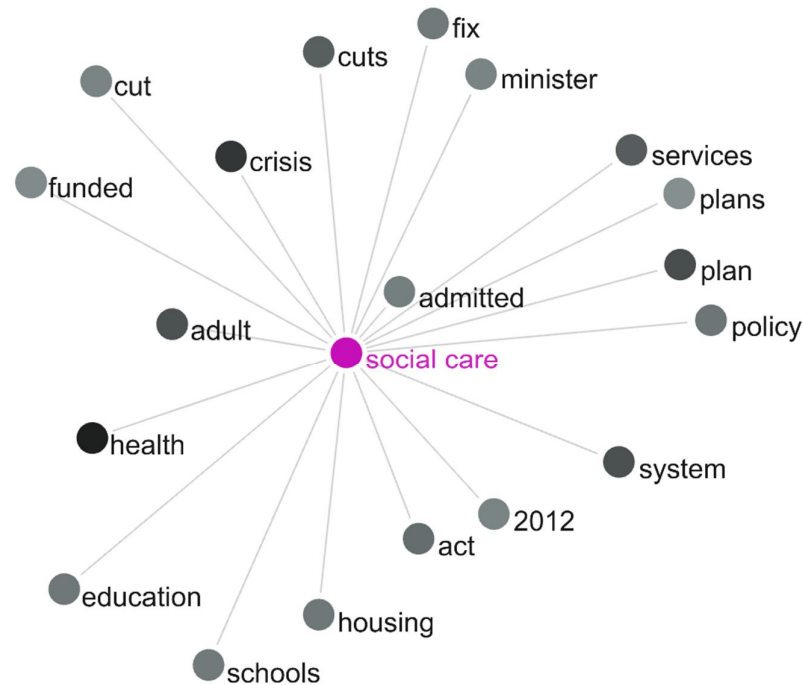
The presence of 'crisis' as a collocate is consistent with a pattern we identified in other datasets. In addition, 'social care' showed an association with healthcare (cf. 'health') as well as with other issues that were presented as pressing, such as education (cf. 'schools' and 'education') and 'housing'.

*The **social care** crisis is killing the NHS- and the Tory-Lib Dems' 2012 **Health & Social Care** Bill is responsible With A&E waiting times at the worst levels ever, sorting social care is the key to helping NHS hospitals # VoteLabour # GE2019* (SocialistVoice, 16.11.2019)

*Very excited at the Tories promising to fix the NHS, police, schools, towns, **social care**, housing, the North, inequality, the economy, productivity, etc after all the damage done to them by- *checks notes*- the Tories.* (davidschneider 2019-11-15)

9. On Twitter, social care is primarily discussed in relation to older people

'Older people' was the social group most frequently mentioned, following the general tendency that had been identified in the analysis of newspaper articles and the manifestos (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Mentions of social groups in the Twitter data
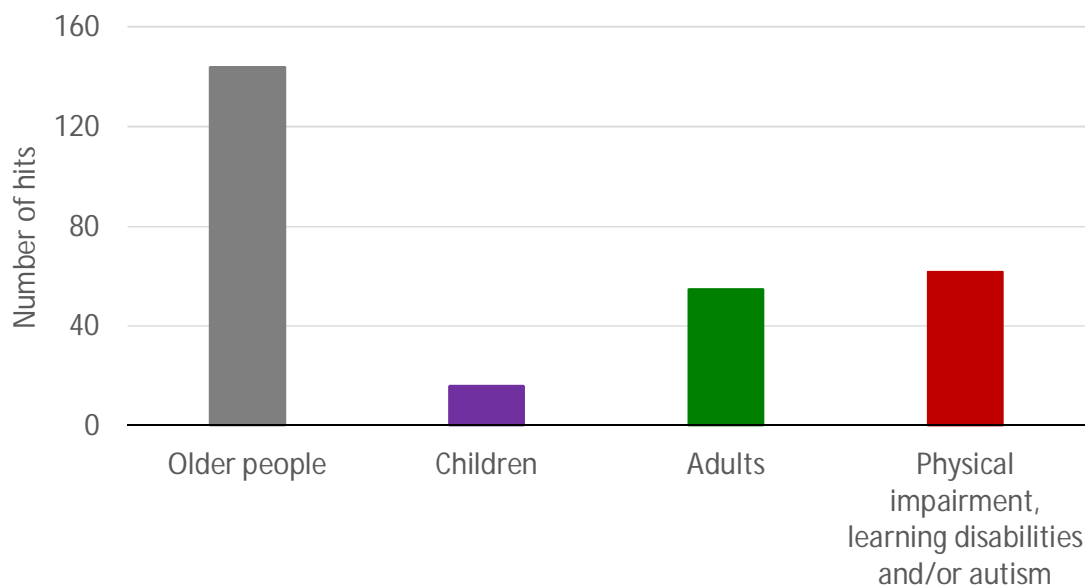
In contrast with other datasets, adults were mentioned nearly as frequently as people with physical impairment, learning disabilities and/or autism, and much more frequently than children. While many tweets mentioned cuts in the funding of adult social care, there were also tweets that highlighted either:

(i)   the vital importance of adult social care to help people live full, independent lives (see example below) or

(ii)   the value of those who provide the services.

*Everyone deserves the right to live a full & independent life. Adult **social care** helps make this happen. With just 3 weeks to # GE2019, it's absolutely crucial that social care & support is at the top of the next govt's agenda (LGAcomms 2019-11-20)*

Conclusions

Overall, the UK press frames social care as an intractable problem resulting from increasing demand (particularly due to longer life expectancy) and decreasing resources (particularly financial resources). Problems in the social care system are presented as negatively affecting the NHS, but different newspapers link these problems with different issues, depending on their broader concerns. All social care users are presented as vulnerable, but the focus is mostly on older people, especially in the tabloids.

Social care received relatively little specific attention in manifestos and speeches by the three main political parties in England (Labour, Conservatives and the LibDems) during the 2019 election campaign. When it was mentioned, it was often used to make party-political points against other parties, although two of the parties (the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives) suggested cross-parties initiatives as possible ways forward.

On Twitter, it was also massively overshadowed by both Brexit and the NHS as a topic of discussion. When it was talked about, the analysis provides further evidence that social care tends to be framed in a negative way.

Whether in the press, political parties' manifestos and speeches or in tweets, the findings point towards a general tendency to focus on the scale of the challenge, the lack of resources, and the vulnerability of those who need social care, especially older people.

These framings may generate a sense of urgency, concern or even anger in the public, which could lead to support or pressure for additional funding. However, the emphasis on crisis and on the enormous size of the challenge may also generate despair or fatalism, which may not be conducive to involvement and positive action. And the focus on vulnerability and older people may suggest that social care solely aims to enable some people to survive in a situation of very high dependence. This could make it hard for most people to identify with users of social care, and to see social care as the means to ensure that everyone can achieve their potential, regardless of their circumstances. In fact, what is absent in the data is just as important as what is present. For example, users of social care are almost never presented as working, and the word 'potential' is never used in relation to people, let alone users of social care.

This leaves ample space to intervene in public discourse with new alternative framings, which could make it easier to generate creative and inclusive long-term solutions.

Part of our aim at CASS is to make Corpus Linguistics accessible, which is why we have created our **free online FutureLearn course**. With the course, we aim to demonstrate that corpus approaches can offer researchers from all disciplines unique, valuable insights into the use and manipulation of language in society. We provide all you need to start 'doing' Corpus Linguistics yourself.

This briefing should act as an introduction and companion to the course where you will begin to apply the concepts and methods mentioned here in a practical way relevant to your field of interest.

The course is free, can be done from home, and comes with a whole range of content and support from world-leading scholars in the field of Corpus Linguistics. For more, visit:

futurelearn.com/courses/corpus-linguistics

For more about CASS and our freely available resources, please visit: **cass.lancs.ac.uk**
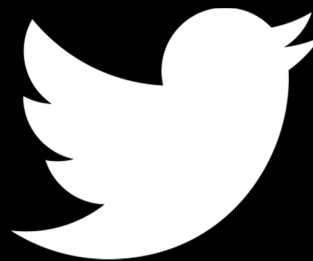
CASS
@CorpusSocialSci

CASS: Briefings is a series of short, quick reads on the work being done at the ESRC/CASS research centre at Lancaster University, UK. Commissioning work from internationally recognised academics in the field of Corpus Linguistics, *CASS: Briefings* set out to make cutting edge research easily accessible, providing a good introduction to the variety of vital and exciting research going on in the area of Corpus Linguistics.