

In Focus: Autumn MP activity

The background features several thick, overlapping pink curved lines that sweep across the lower half of the page, creating a sense of movement and depth.

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Introduction

The role of an MP is to scrutinise law, hold the Government to account and represent the evolving interests of their constituents. With Covid interrupting and restricting the many activities of MPs, how have they fared in their parliamentary participation and how active have they been in terms of public engagement?

In this *In Focus* report, Vuelio and sister company Pulsar have analysed thousands of parliamentary data points and millions of social media posts to provide you with a concise report on our representatives.

The period analysed was 1 September to 27 October, with side by side comparisons on topics, themes and demographic breakdown of the MPs themselves.

This period was chosen due to the number of activities and challenges MPs faced in a short amount of time:

- There was a renewed focus on keeping the coronavirus infection rates down and an increase in testing, though the system was overwhelmed in September as it had yet to scale up in sufficient time to cope with the increase in demand.
- The EU trade negotiations reached a crucial stage, with the UK's transition period scheduled to conclude on 31 December 2020.
- The main parties all held virtual conferences for their members.
- As Covid cases began to increase again throughout September and October, there was a heated debate about university students who had been allowed to start the term but then quickly found themselves locked down in their accommodation only able to access online tuition.
- A new tiered system of measures to control the spread of the virus was introduced. The Prime Minister set out on 12 October that these new measures would be voted on by MPs on 13 October, adding an extra dimension for MPs who were then more vocal in support or against the new measures on social media.
- Marcus Rashford repeatedly made the headlines off the pitch for his campaign for free school meals in partnership with the charity FareShare.



@HMGDepartments



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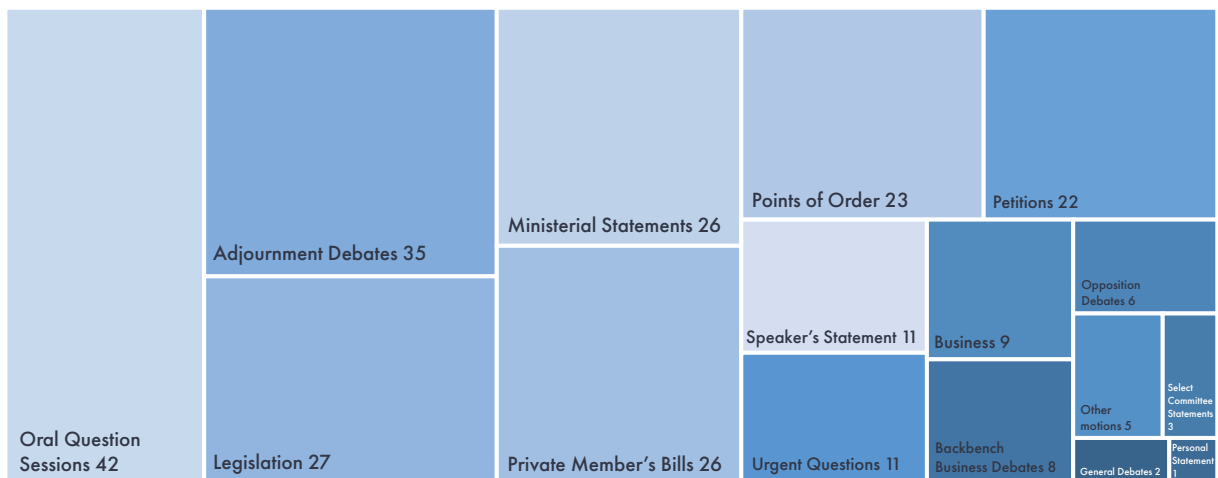
@FareShareUK



Vuelio Political Monitoring

What happened in the Commons?

With Covid-19 restrictions implemented, MP participation in House of Commons business has been restricted with a cap on the number of MPs who can sit in the chamber and some MPs in vulnerable groups or in isolation participating virtually, for obvious reasons. Despite this, the Commons has held a significant number of debates, departmental question sessions and statements, relating to a broad range of topics.



Parliamentary activity versus 2019

Despite the Covid-induced restrictions on participation, in terms of the number of items of business it considered over the period in question (1 September 2020 to 23 October 2020), the House of Commons was much busier than in the equivalent period last year (3 September 2019 to 24 October 2019), with 257 items compared to 188.

This is because this period last year coincided with the apotheosis of the Brexit wars in the Commons, in which Parliament was prorogued and this was in turn deemed unlawful, only for Parliament to then be prorogued again. As a result, the Commons sat on 35 days in this period this year, and just 21 last year (including one highly-unusual Saturday sitting last October to consider the new Brexit deal).

However, the number of urgent questions and ministerial statements combined was noticeably higher for 2019 (46) compared to 2020 (37), despite the much lower number of sitting days, reflecting the highly contentious nature of the Brexit debate. Within this, ministerial statements outweighed urgent questions this year, while this was the other way round last year, perhaps reflecting the different natures of the two years' crises: one political, one medical.

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QUESTIONS

19% first
time MPs

78% MPs
tabled questions

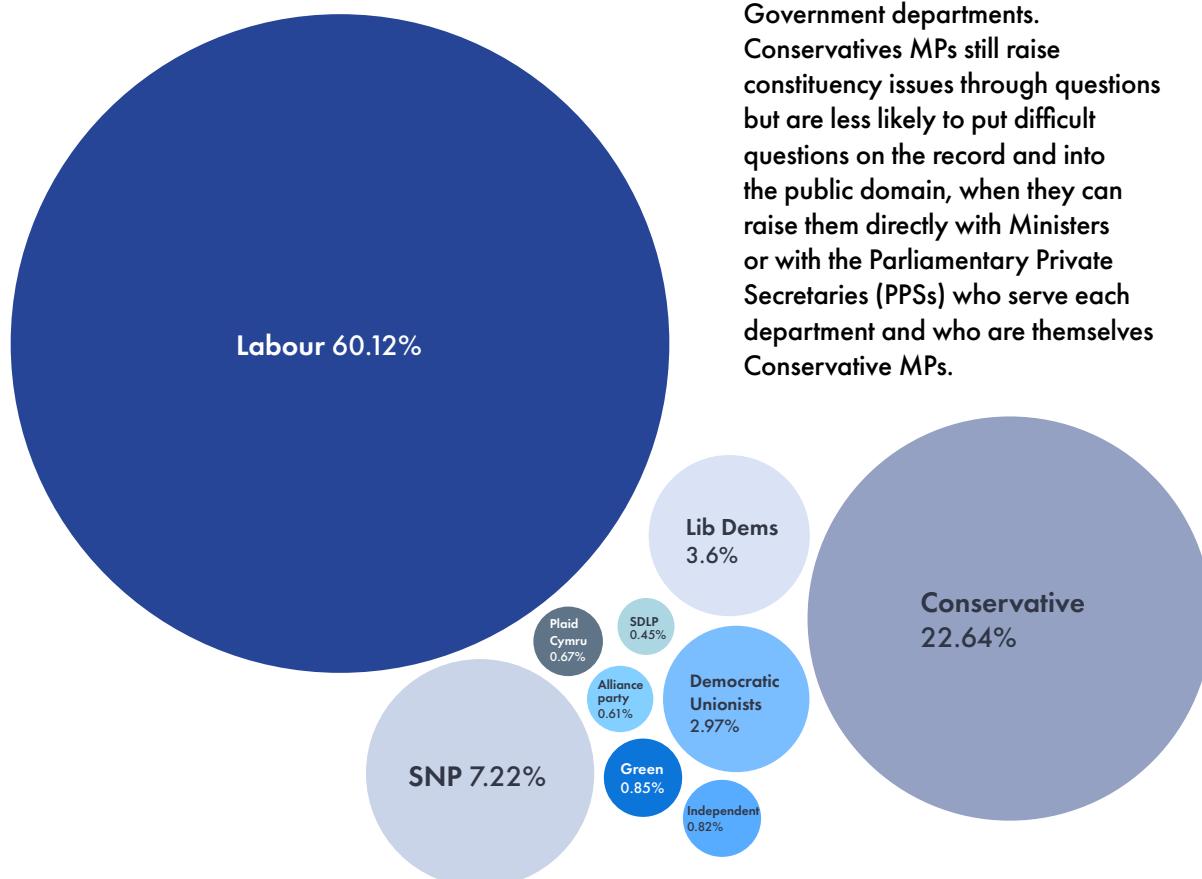
Parliamentary questions

Written parliamentary questions play a significant role in the UK's parliamentary democracy, allowing MPs and Members of the House of Lords to hold Government Ministers to account. Questions request information on the work, policy and activities of Government departments. The responses are published online and often act as a good way of getting a matter formally 'on the record'.

Questions have to be drafted in an open way and not offer or seek expressions of opinion. They cannot be identical to another question answered in the previous three months. They cannot seek information which is already readily available and in the public domain. MPs submit their question to a clerk at the Table Office.

Assessing the number and range of questions an MP or peer has 'tabled' formally is a good indication of their areas of interest and any constituency matters which they are keen to resolve. Here we focus on written questions tabled:

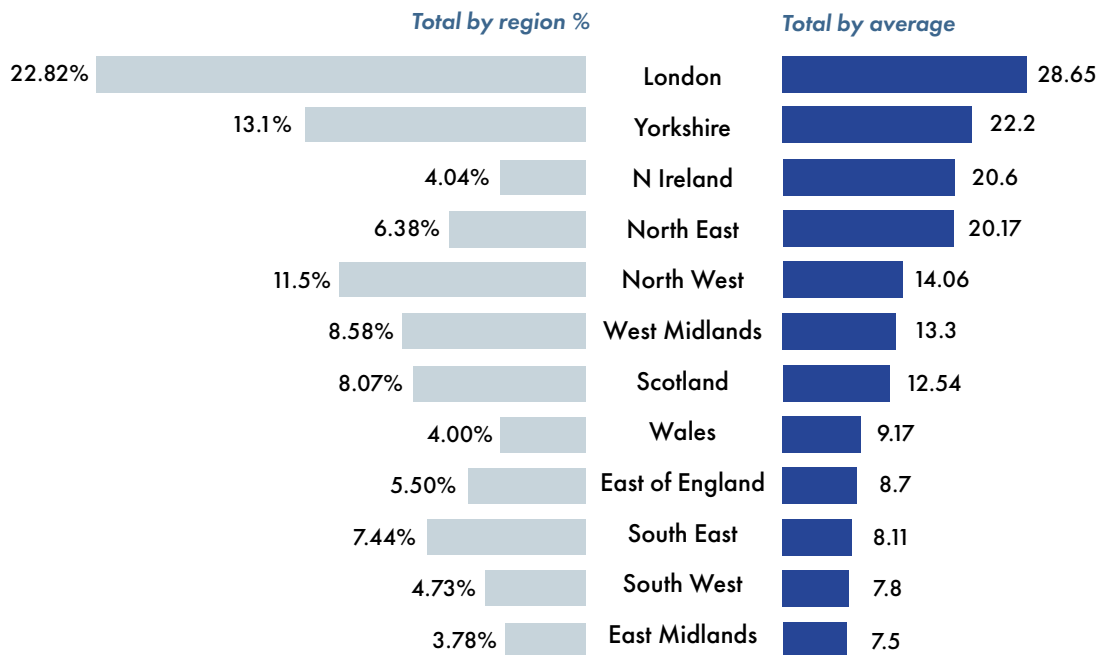
Party Numbers



As the official opposition, the Labour party tabled more questions than any other group, scrutinising Government departments. Conservatives MPs still raise constituency issues through questions but are less likely to put difficult questions on the record and into the public domain, when they can raise them directly with Ministers or with the Parliamentary Private Secretaries (PPSs) who serve each department and who are themselves Conservative MPs.

Regions

A regional analysis of questions tabled offers a new perspective. Not all regions are equal in number of MPs, so examining the average questions by number of MPs demonstrates how active the region is in using this method of scrutiny on behalf of constituents.



The most prolific region, both in terms of total questions asked and highest average is London, followed by Yorkshire – which earlier this year was Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s preferred location for a temporary Parliament relocation and makes up part of the Red Wall seats.

While the North West was the next most prolific region by total questions tabled, Northern Ireland – the smallest region by MPs – and the North East have significantly higher averages. MPs in these regions are tabling significantly more questions than their equivalents elsewhere.

At the other end of the scale, Conservative-majority East Midlands asked the fewest questions and had the lowest average per MP.

While London has much higher activity than other regions, this has largely been driven by one individual, who has tabled more than twice the number of questions than any other MP...

MPs who tabled the most questions



Emily Thornberry (433)

Topping Vuelio's list of the most active questioners over the period is Labour's Shadow International Trade Secretary Emily Thornberry. Many of her questions were to her ministerial counterpart Liz Truss, but many of the issues she raised – such as arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the conflict in Yemen (the topic of a high proportion of her questions), trade in wildlife or the impact of trade deals on British agriculture cut right across the Government. Others were more narrowly focused on the Department for International Trade, with detailed questions on spending and meetings, and on progress with post-Brexit trade agreements. The pandemic did not escape Thornberry's attention either, with questions on stockpiles of medicines and medical devices



Rachael Maskell (186)

While Rachael Maskell is Shadow Voluntary Sector and Charities Minister, she asked questions on an impressively wide range of topics, many of them linked to the pandemic. For example, she asked a range of questions on coronavirus testing, the impact the response to the virus was having on children's education, and about the support being given to different types of business. Given her brief, she also asked for information on matters related to supporting the charitable and voluntary sectors during the epidemic. Other issues ranged incredibly broadly, from sentencing policy on dangerous driving to marine protection areas, via support to victims of sexual violence and a range of local issues, from backlogs in court cases in York to flooding.



Jim Shannon (159)

DUP MP Jim Shannon is well-known to Westminster watchers for his regular interventions in adjournment debates, no matter the topic. His appearance towards the top of this list is therefore not much of a surprise, and neither is the wide range of issues he enquired about. From locusts in India and Pakistan, to the theft of lead from churches, let alone Rabbit Hemorrhagic Disease, China spying on Tibetan refugees or e-scooters, Jim Shannon was interested! A disproportionate number of questions were directed to the Department for Health and Social Care, but these also covered a broad range of topics, such as cancer, youth mental health and vaccination.

Best of the rest: [Lyn Brown](#) (143); [Colleen Fletcher](#) (139)

New MPs who tabled the most questions



Daisy Cooper (88)

Daisy Cooper has moved quickly to establish herself as a new MP, becoming Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats and leading the campaign against the 10pm pub curfew. Unsurprisingly, a number of her questions are on the impact of the pandemic on the hospitality sector. During the period she also became the party's education spokesperson, and asked a number of linked questions, covering topics such as the impact of the pandemic on foster carers, pupils with Special Educational Needs, and free school meals. Other questions covered a broad spectrum, from waste disposal to fraud, child refugees in Greece, and compensation for those affected by the Windrush scandal.



Owen Thompson (79)

Owen Thompson's high placing in this list may reflect the fact that this is not his first stint as an MP – he previously sat on the SNP benches from 2015 to 2017. He is another MP with an impressively wide-ranging set of questions. Themes that do emerge over the period include an interest in the duties paid by brewers, and an interest in support for businesses and jobs during the pandemic, such as the Coronavirus Job Retention and Kickstart Schemes. He also showed an interest in parents, with questions on the impact of maternity allowance on Universal Credit, health and safety at work and pregnancy, parental leave, and dental care for mothers. Other questions covered issues such as spaceflight, tobacco and hydrogen.



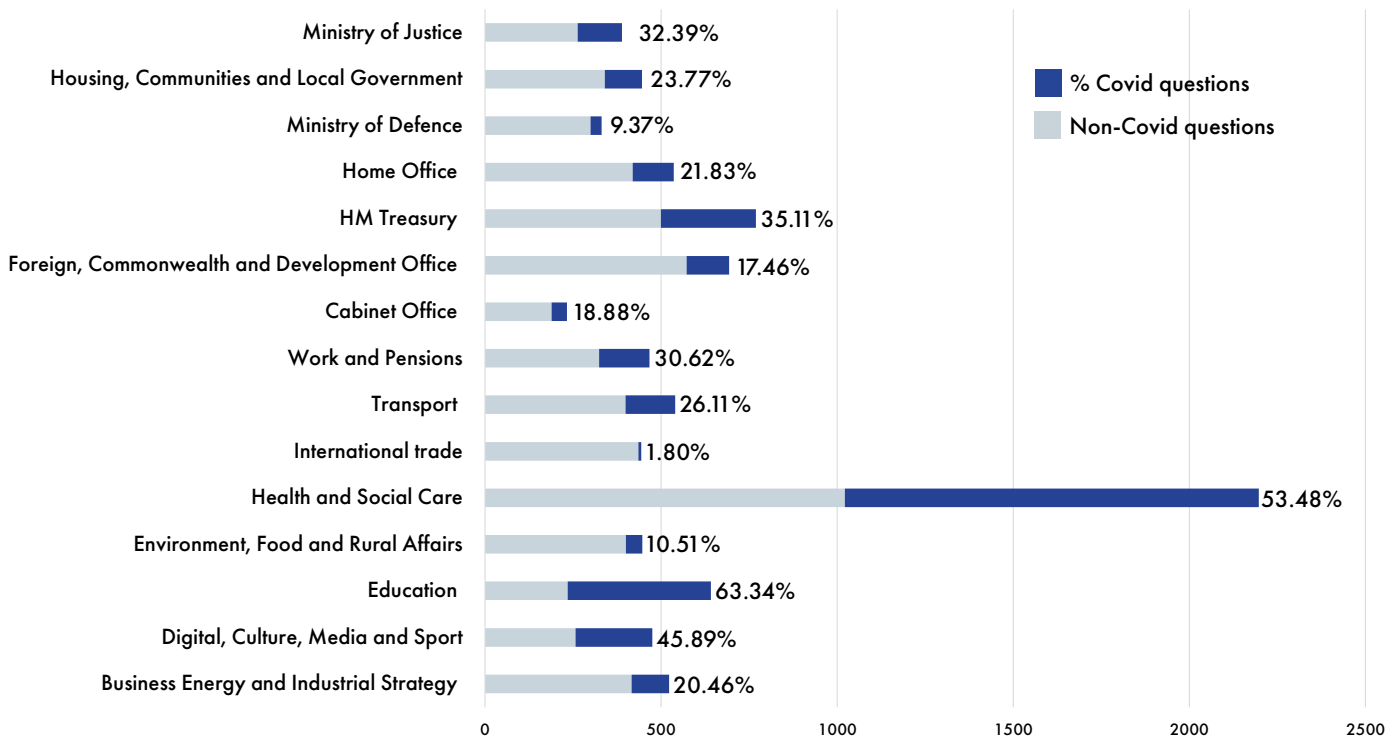
Abena Oppong-Asare (57)

Many of Abena Oppong-Asare's questions were directed to the Department for Health and Social Care – hardly a surprise given the context. These covered a wide range of topics, from the impact of the pandemic on carers, support for those with dementia and access to social care. The pandemic stretched into the Labour MP's other questions, with issues raised including support for businesses, statutory sick pay, and the educational attainment gap. Broader issues she asked about included restrictions on the fur trade, torture, air quality, VAT on sanitary products, and gay conversion therapy.

Best of the rest: [Apsana Begum \(50\)](#); [Anthony Mangnall \(44\)](#)

Covid-19 activity

Questions relating to Covid-19 have been asked of every ministerial department with a third (33%) mentioning the virus directly. This chart includes every department that received more than 100 questions tabled in the period.



The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), which is typically tabled with more written questions than any department, received the most number of questions and the most relating to Covid-19 in the period. As the volume of questions tabled to an already stretched DHSC was much higher than in previous Parliaments, there have been delays in the department's response time to questions. Addressing concerns in November, the department introduced a 'Parliamentary questions performance recovery plan' to address the backlog.

What's interesting to note is that even though there were more economic statements in the period, and the Chancellor launched a financial initiatives, the number of questions tabled to HM Treasury scrutinising this activity has comparatively low volumes of both total questions and Covid questions.

The volume of questions for the Department for Education reflects the period analysed, which covered schools, colleges and universities returning for the new academic year, and the university Covid crisis.

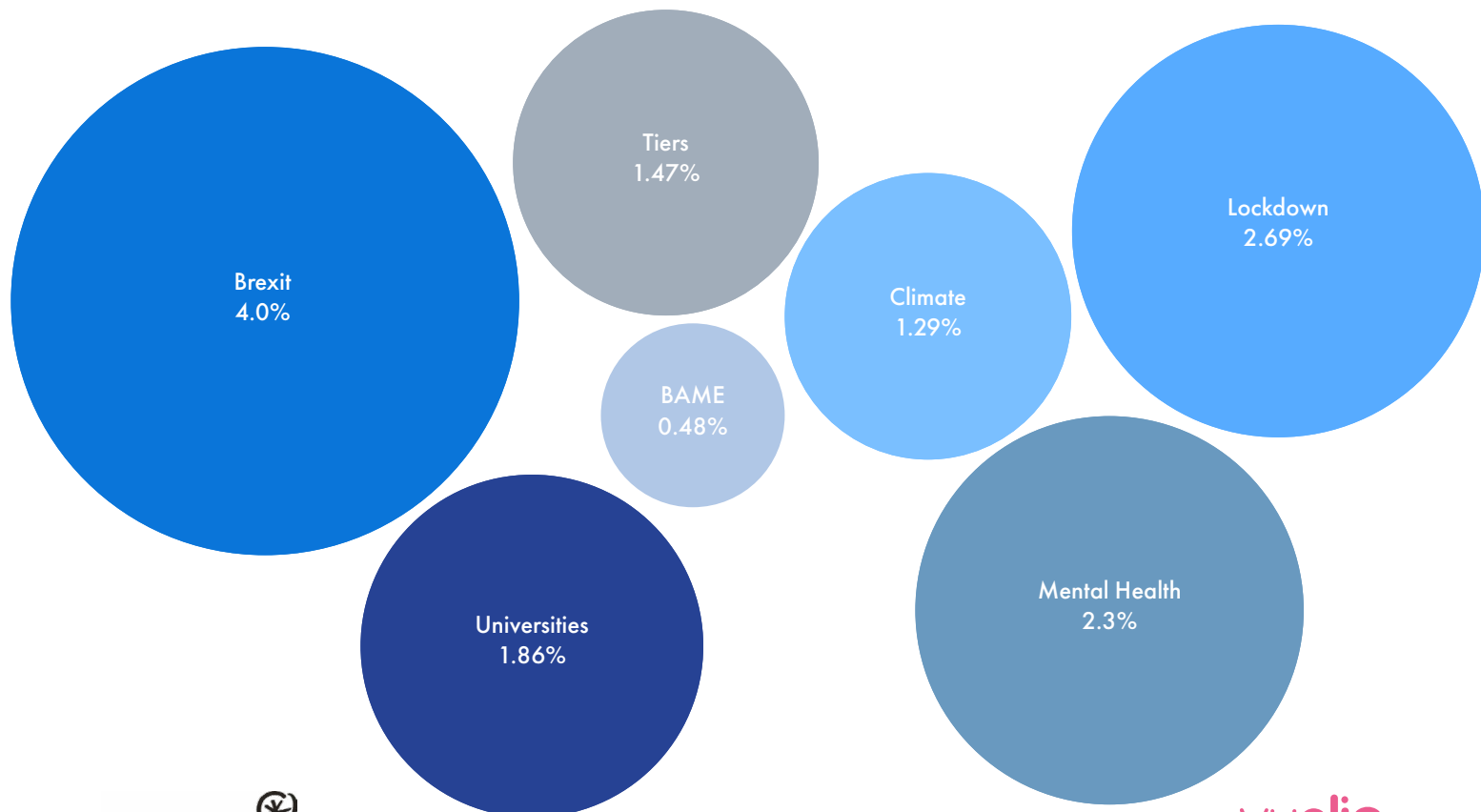
The Covid discourse has also drawn attention away from Brexit, despite the end of the transition period being just weeks away. This is perhaps why there are not more questions tabled to the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office or the Department for International Trade.

Themes in questions

While Covid was directly mentioned in a third of questions tabled, Brexit – or specifically the transition period – was directly referred to in just 4%. This might seem surprising given the impending end of the transition period and the slow progress of negotiations on the post-Brexit UK-EU relationship, but it actually reflects the fact that all but the most ardent of remainers have accepted that the UK has left the EU, and that the transition period will expire at the end of 2020. As a result, Brexit discussion has now splintered into strands focused less on Brexit as an overall concept than on the nuts and bolts of individual policy areas, whether that be agricultural subsidies, equivalence decisions for financial services, or the future of environmental regulation.

Campaigners will be disappointed to note that the mental health and climate changes crises were only the focus of a tiny proportion of questions tabled, despite both having tangible connections to the pandemic and its effects on society.

There was a stark drop in the number of questions that mentioned BAME in the period compared to the two months prior to summer recess and immediately after the death of George Floyd that led to a rise in Black Lives Matter events. This shows a downtrend in MPs using questions to highlight or clarify departmental or Government activity relating to BAME issues and equality. In the period before summer recess there were 145 BAME mentions in written questions and 30 mentions of Racism, compared to 46 BAME mentions and 3 mentions of racism in the two months after summer recess.



Pulsar social listening

Twitter is now an essential tool for parliamentarians seeking to campaign on issues and engage with their constituents. 90% of MPs have Twitter accounts.

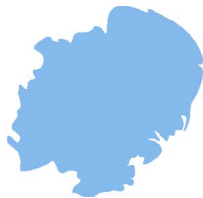
We have used MP's impressions on Twitter as an indicator of activity and engagement. Impressions measure the number of times a post has been displayed in a timeline, whether it is clicked on or not. It is based on the MP's number of followers, total engagements (if content is clicked on or commented upon) and total shares.

The MPs with the highest impressions are all based in London and are, or have recently been, party leaders: Boris Johnson, Keir Starmer and Jeremy Corbyn.

Outside of London, Labour MPs tend to enjoy higher impressions than those in other parties, with Jess Phillips, Angela Rayner and Ed Miliband all leading their respective regions. Conservative Steve Baker bucks this trend; he is one of the most active MPs on Twitter and consequently has a large number of impressions.

The least active regions are Northern Ireland, North East, East Midlands and South West.

East of England	Impressions
Matt Hancock	8.95m
Clive Lewis	5.96m
James Cleverly	4.54m
Priti Patel	3.05m
Lilian Greenwood	2.49m



Wales	Impressions
Chris Bryant	11.6m
Carolyn Harris	2.97m
Stephen Doughty	2.79m
Jo Stevens	2.06m
Kevin Brennan	1.46m



London	Impressions
Boris Johnson	45.6m
Keir Starmer	38.3m
Jeremy Corbyn	33.6m
David Lammy	28.7m
Rosena Allin-Khan	14.5m



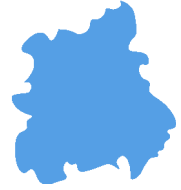
East Midlands	Impressions
Jon Ashworth	4.57m
Liz Kendall	3.69m
Andrea Leadsom	3.31m
Toby Perkins	2.13m
Nadia Whittome	1.95m



South East	Impressions
Steve Baker	28.3m
Caroline Lucas	27.6m
Tan Dhesi	9.4m
Tom Tugendhat	6.21m
Dominic Raab	5.3m



West Midlands	Impressions
Jess Phillips	27.8m
Liam Byrne	3.71m
Michael Fabricant	3.68m
Nadhim Zahawi	3.01m
Sajid Javid	2.81m



Yorkshire & Humber	Impressions
Ed Miliband	11.5m
Rishi Sunak	5.78m
Sarah Champion	5.58m
Yvette Cooper	5.5m
Karl Turner	4.7m



Scotland	Impressions
Angus MacNeil	9.21m
Joanna Cherry	5.84m
Pete Wishart	4.9m
Ian Blackford	4.6m
Philippa Whitford	4.39m



Northern Ireland	Impressions
Michelle Gildernew	1.88m
Colum Eastwood	1.82m
Claire Hanna	1.26m
Jeffrey Donaldson	0.55m
Chris Hazzard	0.55m



North East	Impressions
Chi Onwurah	4.35m
Sharon Hodgson	4.1m
Grahame Morris	2.56m
Dehenna Davison	1.7m
Alex Cunningham	1.65m



South West	Impressions
Ben Bradshaw	5.1m
Johnny Mercer	2.9m
Luke Pollard	2.49m
Jacob Rees-Mogg	2.23m
Michael Gove	1.84m



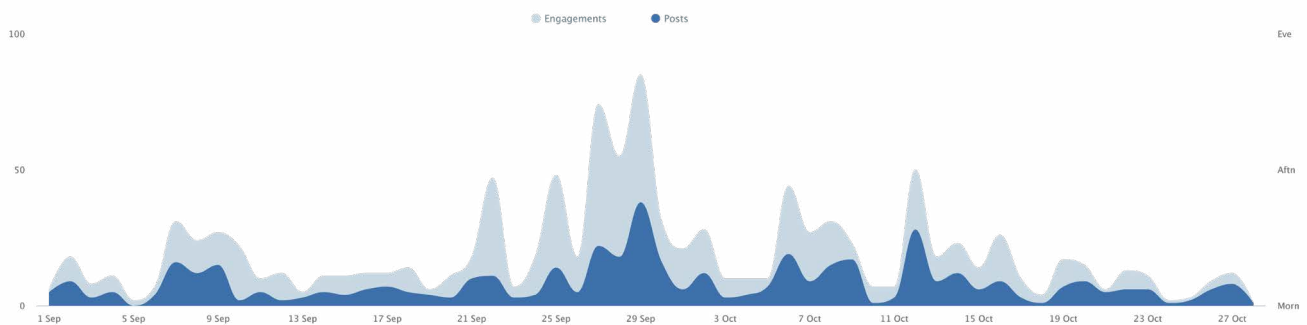
North West	Impressions
Angela Rayner	27.8m
Tim Farron	22.3m
Angela Eagle	8.22m
Andrew Gwynne	8.19m
Bill Esterson	7.18m



Themes on social media

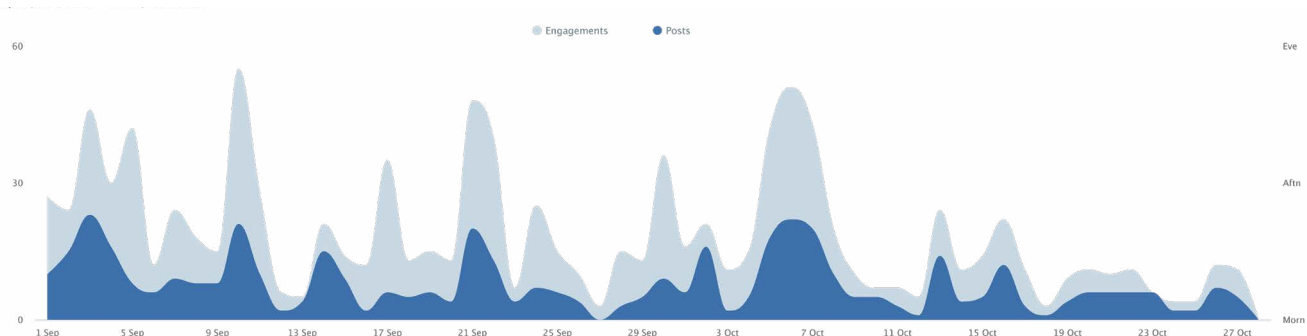
The same themes we saw in the tabled questions were similarly a focus for MPs on social media. We have measured the volume of MPs' posts around the themes and the number of engagements, from other MPs, those posts received.

Universities engagement



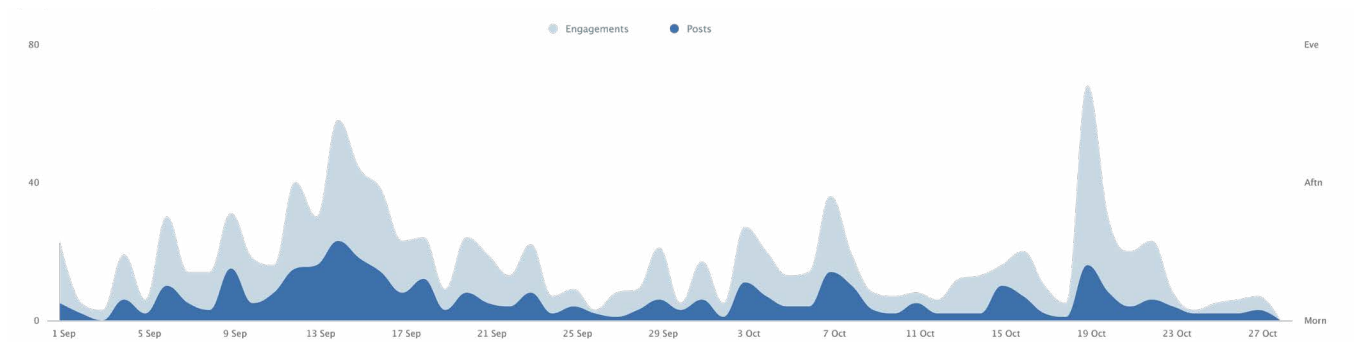
The return of university students under the shadow of covid restrictions and resulting isolation concerns motivated many MPs to comment on their social channels. This accounts for the large spike and 8.54million impressions across the period.

Climate Change Engagement



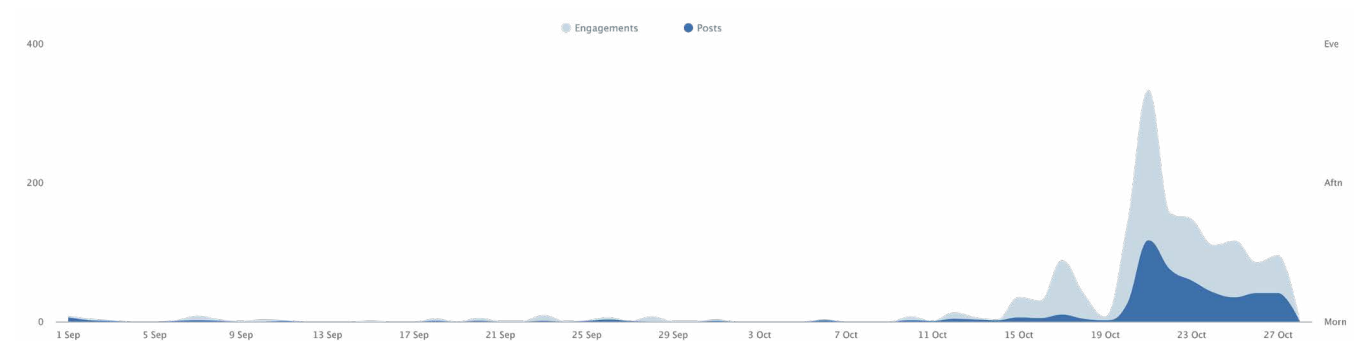
With 454 posts in the period and 8.5million impressions, MPs are engaged in the climate conversation online much more so than in their parliamentary scrutiny through questions. The total number of written questions mentioning climate was a mere 1.2% of the total. The second lowest in themes highlighted in this report.

Brexit and Trade Engagement



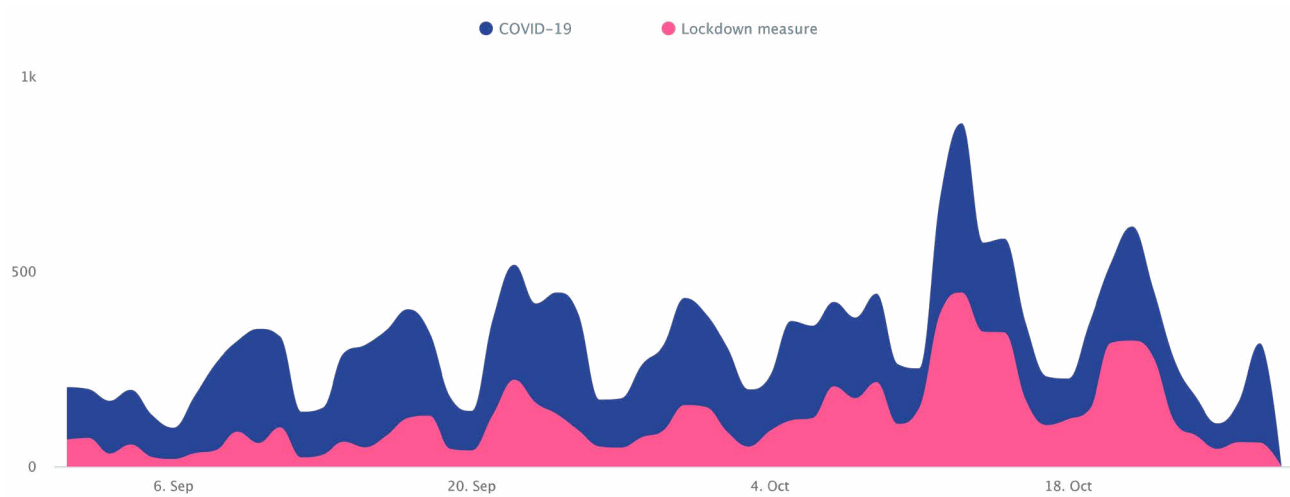
MPs have regularly taken to social media to express their disdain, or echo the Government’s messaging, about Brexit during the period in question. Each of the spikes on the graph reflects a significant moment as the negotiating process dragged on this autumn. The large spike in mid-September reflects the contentious nature of the UK Internal Market Bill, which Northern Ireland Secretary Brandon Lewis admitted breaks ‘international law in a very specific and limited way’. The late October spike coincides with the intensive events of 19 October when Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove appeared in the Commons to warn that the EU had ‘in effect, ended the trade negotiations’, the EU’s chief negotiator Michel Barnier offered to ‘intensify’ talks, Gove welcomed this as ‘constructive’, but Number 10 said there was ‘no basis to resume talks’ without a ‘fundamental change’. The real-time nature of social media commentary allowed MPs to comment on the situation as it played out – indeed, Barnier tweeted his offer following his call with his opposite number, Lord Frost.

Marcus Rashford



Marcus Rashford’s campaign to secure free school meals for children throughout half term received a huge amount of social attention, with MPs’ joining in the conversation from the middle of October. They did this through direct mentions of Rashford, as well as using his campaign hashtag #endchildfoodpoverty and Labour repeatedly raised the need for free school meals to continue throughout half term. The MPs who achieved the most impressions for this theme are all Labour MPs: Keir Starmer, Angela Rayner, Jess Phillips and Wes Streeting.

Covid and Lockdown



We also compared the volume of mentions for Covid and Lockdown, showing clearly that while the level of conversation around Covid has been consistent throughout the period, it was increasingly driven by the stricter lockdown regulations that affected each part of the country differently.

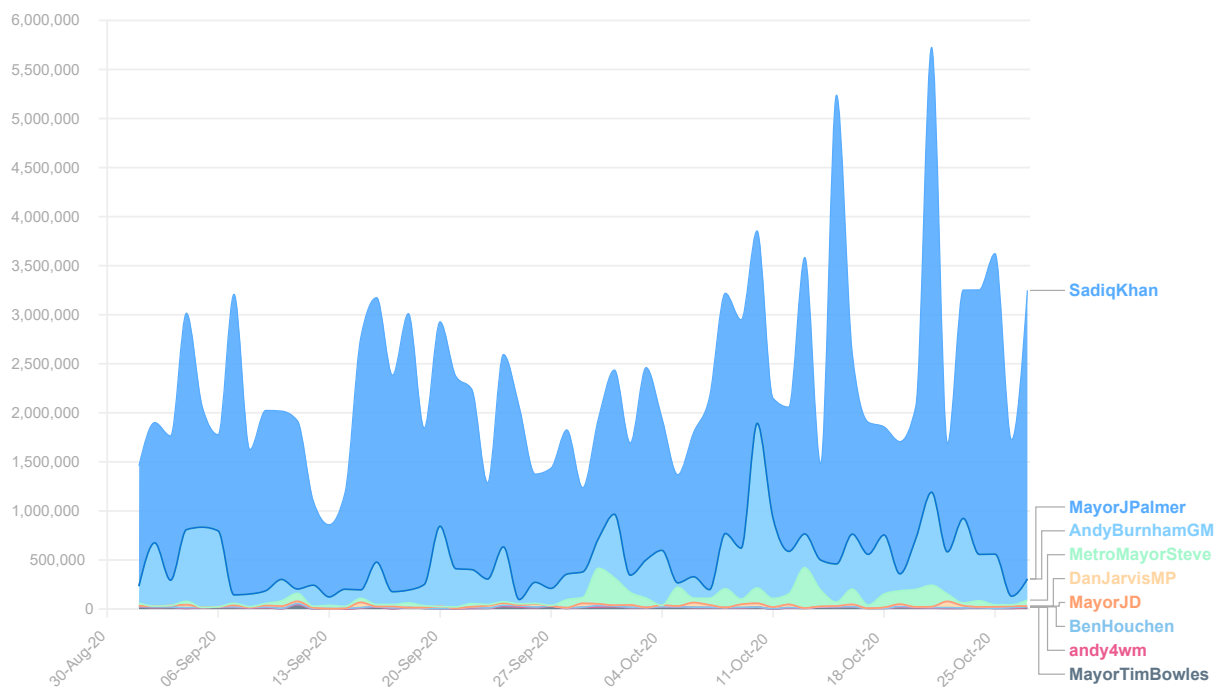
The biggest peak in this discussion, in mid-October, followed Labour calling for a short 'circuit break' lockdown in England, while at the same time London Mayor Sadiq Khan warned that London could be imminently put into tougher lockdown measures.

A nod to the Metro Mayors...

Towards the end of the period, Metro Mayors were highly engaged with the public on the issue of lockdown measures, as the tiered system came into effect. This was the first significant test for the metro mayoral system as it pitted Mayors against the Government in crucial financial negotiations. Andy Burnham was outraged, for example, when an offer of support for Greater Manchester was withdrawn by the Government on 22 October though it was later reinstated. He accused Boris Johnson's administration of 'playing poker with people's lives' and asked if it was 'piling pressure on people to accept the lowest figure they can get away with? Is that how they are running this country?'

In terms of social media impact during this period London Mayor Sadiq Khan had strong engagement, achieving over five million impressions on two days in October, largely because he has the largest Twitter following of all the Metro Mayors with 1.1 million followers.

Outside of London, Andy Burnham had an impressive number of impressions with just under two million on 11 October as he battled with Government over additional financial support for Greater Manchester. Andy Burnham's ratio of followers to constituents is higher, at 13.87%, than Sadiq Khan's in London, which is 11.82%.



About this report

Data and analysis for this report has come from Vuelio Political Monitoring, The Vuelio Political Services Team and Pulsar TRAC. MP activity was measured in Parliament and on Twitter from 1 September to 27 October 2020. Both Vuelio and Pulsar are part of the Access Intelligence Group, which also includes ResponseSource.

For more information about this report and how you can make sense of new political times with our services:

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