



## Reframing Public Perceptions of Social Care

Advancing the vision for adult  
social care and support in Scotland

### Briefing

# Social Care, Public Opinion and Elections

## A Shared Challenge for the 2026 Scottish Parliament Election

Social care presents a challenge in electoral politics. It affects almost everyone at some point in our lives, yet public understanding of what it is and how it works remains limited. It rarely appears as a high-salience issue in opinion polling, despite its central role in supporting everyday life, families and communities.

Public views on social care exist, but they are often hidden within wider stories rather than actively expressed. People tend to engage with social care through personal experience rather than abstract debate, and our understanding is shaped by fragmented and sometimes confusing public discourse. As a result, polling offers only a partial guide. Low salience may reflect limited shared understanding, not indifference.

## The role of elections in opinion forming

Both politicians and campaigners operate within a democratic system that must respond to public opinion while also addressing long-term social needs. On 'hidden-but-important' issues like social care, leadership involves more than responding to expressed demand. It requires clear explanation and human connection to build public support for action.

*This is not about moving ahead of the public, but about supporting the public to engage meaningfully with a complex and essential system.*

### About us

We are a collaboration based at the University of Stirling, working to improve how social care is understood and discussed in Scotland. Our work brings together lived experience, practice, policy and evidence to build legitimacy for long-term action. We are supported by the Rayne Foundation and Improving Adult Care Together (IMPACT).

Over the election period, we will be producing practical, accessible guidance to help those shaping public narratives to explain social care more clearly, avoid common communication traps and strengthen public understanding over time.

## What this means in practice

Election periods intensify focus on immediate concerns, but they also create space for values-based discussion about the kind of society Scotland wants to be. They offer a rare opportunity to clarify the role of government in supporting everyday life and to establish public permission for longer-term reform. Social care fits naturally within this space when it is framed as an essential part of what makes a good society.

Based on our work over the past 18 months, we recommend that campaigners and politicians:

**Do not treat low salience as low permission.** If social care is not high in the polls, this does not indicate public disinterest. It reflects uncertainty about what social care is, who it is for and what a good system looks like. Elections should be used to invest in explanation and sense-making to build legitimacy for collective action.

**Use the campaign to explain, not just promise.** Elections are one of the few moments when people expect political actors to talk about how systems work. Clear explanation of social care (what it does, why it matters and how it supports everyday life) helps create informed debate.

**Be disciplined about using ‘crisis’ language.** Crisis narratives can open attention, but they can make problems seem insurmountable and people powerless. It is more persuasive to offer credible, understandable solutions, and avoid language that implies failure.

**Treat public understanding as an outcome in its own right.** If people leave the election period with a clearer sense of social care and its role in making a good society, that is progress - even if it does not immediately register in polling. Narrative shift is cumulative and depends on consistency over time.

**Use lived experience to build understanding.** Personal stories are powerful, but they should illuminate how the system works, not position social care as something that happens only to “other” people. Connecting individual experience to the ‘bigger’ picture strengthens legitimacy.

**Use campaigning to create permission, not pressure.** Effective election-period campaigning supports political leadership by making long-term action legitimate and possible. It focuses on human values and shared understanding, recognising that achieving durable change means bringing the public into the conversation about social care.

