



Reframing
Public Perceptions
of Social Care

Advancing the vision for adult
social care and support in Scotland

A practical guide for reframing care and support in Scotland

Phase 1: Clarify the story you
want to tell

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About the Public Perceptions of Adult Social Care project

The project, based at the University of Stirling, explores how adult social care and support is understood by the public and how communication shapes support for long-term change.

Public conversations about social care and support are often dominated by crisis, cost and pressure. While these issues are real, problem-only narratives can make it harder for people to understand what social care and support is, why it matters to everyone and how improvement is possible.

This briefing series offers a practical approach to communicating about adult social care and support in ways that build public understanding and support constructive dialogue and ideas for change. The guidance was developed following group workshops and discussions with over 30 key stakeholders in Scotland.

The series is organised into three short briefing papers, each covering a key phase of effective communication. Each briefing can be used on its own, but together they provide a practical route from narrative strategy to message delivery and learning.

With funding from:



More resources and guidance available at:

www.reframingcare.stir.ac.uk

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Introduction: A three-phase approach to strengthening public understanding and support

Adult social care touches all our lives, yet the public story we tell often focuses on crisis. That makes it harder to build the understanding and support we need in Scotland to improve social care for everyone.

Co-produced with leaders in the sector (including practitioners and those with lived experience) we developed a three-phase approach to support organisations to move away from crisis messaging and towards shared purpose and practical solutions.

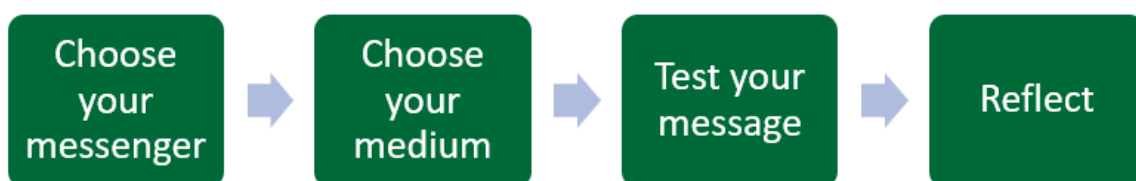
PHASE 1: Clarify the story you want to tell



PHASE 2: Build the argument



PHASE 3: Deliver and learn



Phase 1 is about getting clear on the story you want to tell

Before developing messages or campaign materials, it is important to be clear about the audience you want to influence, the assumptions they may already hold, and the values that can help them connect with adult social care and support.

This phase helps you move from reacting to the current public story about crisis and pressure towards building a clearer, values-led narrative rooted in fairness, interdependence and shared benefit.

1.1 Why reframe adult social care and support?

Adult social care and support is shaped not only by funding decisions and service design, but also by the public story we tell about it.

The way social care and support is described influences what people believe it is, who they think it is for, who they believe should take responsibility, and whether improvement feels realistic.

This matters because public attitudes towards adult social care and support are not fixed. How people think about adult social care is shaped by their experience, the stories they hear, the explanations they are given and the way that politicians and the media discuss key issues.

Recent Scottish polling from the Scottish Political Monitor shows that social care and support is the sixth most important issue for voters ahead of the Scottish Parliament election, using the wording “*Social care (including for older and disabled people)*”. Among Labour supporters, it rises to the second most important issue, with 33% saying it will be very important in deciding how they vote, second only to the NHS.

At the same time, wider public attitudes research continues to show the fragility of public understanding. British Social Attitudes findings suggest that only a small minority of people report satisfaction with social care and support services, while many remain unclear about how the system works, who it is for and what improvement should look like. Political attention without public understanding creates a weak foundation for transformational change.

Our own action learning groups across Scotland have reinforced why messaging matters. Participants consistently described a tension between honesty and hope: the need to speak truthfully about underfunding, workforce pressures and poor outcomes, while avoiding crisis-driven narratives that reinforce fatalism, stigma or blame. Across manifestos, media work and internal strategy discussions, many organisations reported slipping back into stories of burden, scarcity and dependency, even when their longer-term ambition is rights, dignity, agency and contribution.

The discussions also highlighted a deeper issue: the shared public story of what social care and support is for has become fragmented. Without a clear collective narrative, organisations often default to crisis language such as workforce shortages, or stories that position social care and support as a resource for the NHS rather than as something valuable in its own right.

When public conversations are dominated by crisis, pressure and failure, audiences can quickly fall back on unhelpful assumptions:

- that care is mainly a private family responsibility
- that it is only relevant to a small group of people
- that the challenges are too big to solve
- that people who need support are dependent rather than contributing

Research on public understanding helps explain why this happens. When people hear repeated messages about crisis, pressure and failure without a clear explanation of causes or credible solutions it reinforces fatalism and makes long-term reform feel unrealistic. These ways of thinking make it harder to build public understanding and political support for long-term reform.

Reframing does not mean ignoring serious problems or pretending that adult social care and support is not under pressure. It means explaining those pressures in ways that build understanding and support for change, rather than reinforcing blame, stigma or the sense of hopelessness. The goal is not to replace honesty with optimism, but to combine realism with a clearer sense of possibility.

Reframing matters because it helps shift the conversation:

- from crisis to contribution
- from “other people” to all of us
- from burden to dignity and independence
- from pressure to possibility

Better framing does not avoid difficult realities. It helps people understand those realities in ways that strengthen support for credible change.

1.2 Who are you trying to influence?

Changing the narrative on adult social care and support does not start with slogans. It starts with clarity about who you are speaking to and what assumptions they are likely to make.

If we do not consciously design our communications with an audience in mind, we easily default to sector language, insider shorthand or crisis rhetoric. Our action learning groups repeatedly highlighted that the same message may land very differently with the general public, policymakers, people who draw on support, or those working inside the sector.

Effective reframing starts with three considerations:

1. Be clear about who you are speaking to.
2. Understand what assumptions, pressures or priorities they bring.
3. Design messages that move understanding forward rather than reinforce existing myths.

Adult social care and support touches many people's lives. Each audience requires slightly different approach, while staying grounded in shared values such as interdependence, dignity and fairness that matter to all of us.

The table on page 6 sets out how key audiences differ and what that means for how we communicate.

Many organisations need to communicate with several audiences at once, but trying to speak equally to everyone can make messages too broad or unclear. It is often more effective to identify one primary audience for each communication and design the message around what they need to understand, while ensuring it still aligns with your wider values and narrative. Different audiences may need different examples, messengers or channels, but the core story should remain consistent.

Audience	Where they are now	Risks in current narrative	What to emphasise	Tone & framing cues
General public	Low understanding of social care and support. Often conflate with NHS. Hear mainly crisis stories.	Fatalism. Individualism. 'Othering'. Social care and support seen as something for "other people".	What difference social care and support makes everyday. Universal experience, shared benefit, fairness, contribution.	Clear, jargon-free, values-led and relatable.
People who draw on social care and support	Direct lived experience of complexity and gaps. Experience of promises not translating into change.	Being spoken about rather than with. Framed as passive, dependent and vulnerable.	Dignity, agency, independence, co-production, rights and contribution.	Respectful, relational, non-extractive and grounded in lived reality.
Families of social care and support users	Balancing care with work and other responsibilities. Often navigating services under pressure.	Reinforcing care as a purely private obligation.	Partnership between paid and unpaid care, normalising care as a life experience, support across the lifecourse.	Empathetic, practical, solution-focused.
Potential workforce	See media stories about low pay and crisis.	Care framed as low-status, gendered, heroic or emotionally draining.	Skilled, meaningful, fulfilling work. Professional identity, progression, contribution and creativity.	Aspirational but realistic, values-led, future-facing.
Politicians (local, devolved & UK)	Operating within fiscal, political and electoral constraints. May respond strongly to public salience and constituent stories.	Care framed only as cost, demand pressure, delayed discharge or NHS relief.	Social care and support as infrastructure, fairness, prevention, contribution, community resilience and public legitimacy.	Strategic, evidence-informed, politically relevant, grounded in public benefit.
Adult social care leaders	Operational pressure, commissioning language and workforce concerns.	Reproducing scarcity narratives, systems jargon and risk language.	Consistent values-based language, shared vision, explanation and solutions	Collegial, practical, action-oriented and focused on narrative leadership.

1.3 Focus on our shared values

Values are the deep-seated beliefs and principles that shape how people understand the world and decide what matters.

People often make sense of complex issues through values rather than technical detail: what feels fair, what reflects dignity, what strengthens communities, and what helps all of us live well. Starting with shared values helps audiences connect emotionally with adult social care and support before engaging with explanations, evidence or policy proposals.

When communication about adult social care and support begins with values that resonate widely, audiences are more likely to see why care matters and why improvement is important. A values-base helps to tell the story and so build collective public and political support for improving the reality of adult social care and support.

Our group discussions consistently reinforced that values are most effective when they help people picture what social care and support makes possible in everyday life. Three values are particularly helpful when communicating about adult social care and support: fairness, interdependence and universalism.

1. Fairness across place and income

This value taps into the generally held view that everyone should be treated fairly, regardless of income or where in Scotland they live. It works particularly well when linked to visible differences in access between places, communities and incomes.

For example you might say:

“Everyone should have the same opportunity to thrive, whether they are older, disabled, or in need of temporary support. Access to good social care and support should not depend on where you live or how much money you have.”

Or more simply:

“A fair Scotland is one where we can all get the social care and support we need, when we need it, and where we live.”

Or these, adapted from How to Talk About Social Care, by FrameWorks UK:

“If we have a disability or health condition, we should all be able to count on the same quality of support to help us live our lives with dignity, regardless of where we live, or how much we earn.”

“We should all be able to get the support we need regardless of our postcode, or the money in our bank account. But right now, too often, that isn’t the case.”

“Right now, the quality of social care and support we receive is too often determined by where we live, or the money in our pocket. That’s not right.”

2. Interdependence

This value stresses the connection between human beings in family, friendships, workplaces and communities throughout our lives. None of us knows what lies ahead. At different points in our lives, many of us will need extra support, whether in childhood, through illness or disability, or as we grow older. At its best, social care and support is there whenever we need it.

For example you might say:

“We all rely on care at different points in our lives, whether as children, during illness, in older age, or when supporting loved ones. A strong social care and support system benefits everyone, not just those who need it today.”

“In every neighbourhood in Scotland, people are being supported by social care and support, which means that social care and support is a part of our local communities, and supports the families of local people needing social care and support to live better lives too.”

A useful shorter version is:

Everyone has a stake in social care and support, because everyone depends on others at different points in life.

3. Universalism

This emphasises that we all have a connection with social care and support, even though we may not all be conscious of that. It matters to all of us, because it helps create the conditions for everyone to live a good life.

This framing helps counter “othering” by showing that social care and support is woven through everyday Scottish life, whether or not we currently notice it.

For example:

“Social care support is used by different people and families all the time, which means that we are all likely to have friends, family members - or even ourselves - needing and using social care and support in the past, now, or in the future.”

1.4 Have you explained what social care and support is?

One of the biggest barriers to improving public understanding is that many people do not have a clear picture of what adult social care and support actually is, what it does, or why it matters.

Our group discussions repeatedly highlighted that people often default to thinking about care homes, hospital discharge, or services for “vulnerable people”, rather than understanding social care and support as the support that helps people live their lives, stay connected and exercise choice.

People don't feel confident in agreeing to change something if they don't understand it. We need a shared basic public understanding of what social care and support is in Scotland, what it does, and how it works.

The most effective explanations are:

- simple
- grounded in everyday life
- explicit about cause and effect
- focused on what social care and support enables

What this mean in practice

These examples show how shared values can be expressed in practice. They are not designed to be used word for word, but to help you shape language that feels clear, natural and relevant for your own audience and context.

For example:

“Social care is about ensuring that everyone - regardless of age, disability, or circumstance - can have the right support to live a dignified, fulfilling life.”

In How to Talk About Social Care, FrameWorks UK make the following suggestions:

“We all want to live in the place we call home, with the people and things we love, doing what matters to us. If we have a disability or health condition, we might need support to do these things. That's the role of social care.”

“We all rely on other people sometimes to get on in life – whether that's a lift to work or a listening ear. If we have a disability or health condition, we might need some extra support. That's the role of social care.”

In **Five Tips to help you successfully talk about adult social care** Social Care Future and partners suggest the following:

“Good social care helps people stay connected and independent. When it’s underfunded, people often only get help in a crisis, which harms wellbeing.”

“Social care helps us to stay well - connected, independent, and part of our communities.”

A particularly helpful test from our group discussions was:

“Can someone picture what changes in a person’s life because social care and support is there?”

Linking cause and effect

Explanation becomes much stronger when it helps people understand **how social care and support creates** wider change for people, families, communities and Scotland as a whole.

This means using simple causal chains: Social care and support helps people do X, which means Y changes, leading to Z.

For example:

“Social care employs thousands of people across Scotland. These staff work with people who need additional support to live their lives fully. Social care staff pay tax, and their work means that the families of people needing social care and support can live better lives too. This leads to economic and social benefits for us all.”

“Across Scotland, thousands of people need additional support to live their lives fully. This might be due to disability, illness, housing insecurity, gender-based violence, addiction or other challenges that arise. We call the services they use ‘social care and support’. Social care contributes to the economy through the tax paid by staff and allows the families of people needing social care and support to live better lives too. This leads to economic and social benefits for us all.”

Phase 1 Checklist

Before developing your message, check that you have clearly defined the basics of your communication.

Commit to reframing

- ☐ Are you moving beyond crisis language to a more constructive story about social care and support?
- ☐ Does your communication help audiences understand why social care and support matters?

Identify your audience

- ☐ Have you identified the main audience you want to influence?
- ☐ Do you understand what that audience already knows or assumes about social care and support?

Lead with shared values

- ☐ Does your message begin with values that connect with lots of people?
- ☐ Are you emphasising ideas such as interdependence, fairness across people and places, or universalism (what matters to all of us)

Explain social care and support

- ☐ Have you clearly explained what social care and support is and how it works?
- ☐ Would someone unfamiliar with the system understand your explanation?

Call to action

Use this initial phase to start a conversation within your organisation or network. You may wish to:

- Discuss these ideas with your colleagues, leadership team or board.
- Talk with members, partners or users about how clearly they think adult social care and support is currently described by your organisation or network.
- Review some recent public communications and consider whether they reinforce crisis, individual responsibility or “othering”.
- Explore the background materials and resources on www.reframingcare.stir.ac.uk to deepen your understanding of reframing.

If you feel that you need to change the way you communicate to better influence the public, move on to Phase 2 on building a stronger argument for adult social care and support.