



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 2: Build the argument

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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.

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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 have developed a three-phase approach to support organisations to move away from crisis messaging and towards shared purpose and practical

PHASE 1: Clarify the story you want to tell



PHASE 2: Build the argument



PHASE 3: Deliver and learn



solutions.

Phase 2 is about building a clear and convincing argument.

Once you have established what social care and support is, why it matters and the values that underpin your story, the next step is to build a clear and convincing argument for change.

This means being precise about the problem you want to address, showing how change is possible, and avoiding language that unintentionally reinforces blame, fatalism or stigma.

2.1 Have you explained the specific problem that needs addressing?

Calls for change in adult social care and support are widespread but clear explanations of the specific problem are sometimes missing.

If we do not define the issue and problem precisely, proposals for reform can appear unfocused, rhetorical or overly ambitious. Precision strengthens credibility and signals seriousness. It builds confidence that change is grounded in practice as well as evidence.

The Challenge

Adult social care and support encompasses a wide range of services, roles and responsibilities. Policy conversations regularly move between support at home, residential care, unpaid carers, workforce arrangements, funding and regulatory structures. These conversations often revert to ‘systems’ language. When we refer to ‘the system’ as a whole, we risk obscuring the specific issue we want to address.

Statements such as ‘Social care and support is under pressure’ or ‘the system is broken’ may express urgency, but they do not explain:

- What is happening in practice.
- Who is affected.
- Why it is happening.
- Where the pressure sits.

Without this clarity, audiences may struggle to distinguish between a temporary difficulty, a long-term structural flaw, a specific funding constraint, or a problem with policy design. In our group discussions, participants repeatedly noted how easily social care and support conversations default to workforce shortages, delayed discharge or “systems pressure”, without explaining the specific problem these create in people’s lives.

Focus on one issue at a time

It can be tempting to catalogue multiple problems at once because social care and support is complex and pressures are interconnected. However, listing several issues without depth can weaken your argument. It can suggest that everything is wrong and nothing is fixable. Instead:

- Select one issue.
- Describe it in concrete terms.
- Explain how it happens.
- Clarify who is affected and how.

From symptoms to mechanisms

A clear problem statement goes beyond symptoms. For example, saying that ‘families are struggling’ describes an outcome. It does not explain the cause of that outcome. Compare:

“Social care and support puts families under pressure.”

with:

“Delays in assessment mean people wait longer for home care. During that period, needs escalate and as a result families have to take on additional caring responsibilities.”

The second explanation identifies what is happening and how it puts pressure on families. Even more precise explanations might identify that, for example:

- Assessment processes are inconsistent.
- Support is only available once needs reach a high threshold.
- Staff turnover disrupts care.

As with explaining what social care and support is, problem statements work best when cause and effect are explicitly linked:

“When eligibility thresholds are too high, people often receive support only when they reach crisis point. This reduces independence, places pressure on unpaid carers and limits people’s ability to stay connected to work, learning and community life.”

A useful test is this: could someone outside the sector describe the problem back to you after hearing your explanation?

In **How to Talk About Social Care**, FrameWorks UK recommend the following:

- Go deep into explaining one aspect of social care and support. Social care and support takes many forms and the issues are complex. It can be tempting to try and talk about all of it, but when we do this, it becomes hard to bring it to life. Where possible, it is better to explain one aspect of social care and support in detail and make clear that this is just one example of the issues.
- Place people's stories in the big picture. Real stories about people's experiences of drawing on social care and support can be a powerful way to bring the topic to life. To prevent these stories from being dismissed as just one person's experience, link it back to the big picture. Stories can be introduced by saying *"like many people drawing on social care and support"* for example *"like many people drawing on social care and support I felt confused by the language that care managers use"*.

2.2 Do you have solutions?

Research on public understanding shows that messages which highlight problems without showing how change is possible can lead to fatalism and a sense of helplessness. This is because audiences conclude that the problem is too big to fix.

Including clear and credible solutions helps maintain a sense of possibility. It shows that social care and support challenges are the result of decisions and structures created by our society - which means in turn that they can be improved by our efforts. The most effective solutions messaging helps people picture what would change in everyday life if the problem were addressed.

A useful proposal by Frameworks UK is to **aim for roughly two mentions of solutions for every mention of a problem**. This keeps the message grounded in reality while emphasising that progress is possible.

This does not mean minimising serious problems or avoiding difficult conversations about underfunding, workforce shortages or poor outcomes. It means making sure that problems do not dominate the story to the point where audiences feel powerless. Solutions help people understand that these challenges are the result of choices and structures, and that improvement is both possible and necessary.

The table below shows some features of strong solutions messaging.

Feature of a strong solution message	What this means in practice
Balanced with problems	Acknowledge challenges but ensure solutions appear more often than problems.
Clear and understandable	Avoid technical language or policy jargon so audiences can easily grasp what change looks like.
Linked to everyday life	Explain how solutions would improve people's daily lives and communities.

The way solutions are presented should reflect the audience you are speaking to. Some audiences may be familiar with the social care and support system, while others may have little prior knowledge.

Before communicating about solutions, consider what your audience already understands and what may need to be explained. The solution-focused message is longer because it adds meaning.

Examples: explaining solutions for different audiences

General public

Problem: Many people cannot get the support they need to live independently.

Solution-focused message: When Social care and support is properly provided, people can stay connected to their families, contribute to their communities and live the lives they choose. Investing in Social care and support strengthens communities and reduces pressure on other services.

People involved with social care and support

Problem: Workforce shortages and funding pressures affect the quality and availability of support.

Solution-focused message: Strengthening workforce conditions, investing in training and recognising the professional value of care work can help create a stable and skilled workforce that delivers consistent support.

2.3 Avoid othering, fatalism and other common pitfalls

Even well-intentioned communication can unintentionally reinforce ideas that make change harder. Research on public understanding shows that certain patterns of language and framing trigger unhelpful assumptions. These assumptions can lead audiences to misunderstand the role of social care and support or feel that meaningful change is impossible.

These four common framing traps are particularly important to avoid:

- **Individualism:** implies that supporting social care and support needs is the sole responsibility of those directly affected. This mindset makes it harder to see the collective benefits to society of having a strong social care and support system, to support everyone, whenever we might need it.
- **Othering:** the mindset that social care and support is only needed by and only benefits people that are ‘not like me’. This mindset can lead to stigmatisation of particular social groups: older people, disabled people, or people labelled as ‘vulnerable’ or ‘frail’. It can reinforce wider stereotyping mindsets, for example that poor health outcomes are normal for people who belong to *other* social groups..
- **Fatalism:** the feeling that problems are too big and complex to solve, for example: “the social care and support system is in crisis and at risk of collapse”. This can normalise the idea that nothing can change and that trying to take action is pointless. It makes it harder for people to see solutions.
- **Scarcity:** The assumption that there is never enough resource, time or support to make improvement possible. Scarcity framing can make difficult choices feel inevitable and crowd out conversations about fairness, prevention and collective benefit.

Instead of reinforcing these assumptions, communication should highlight shared values like fairness, interdependency and universalism. These values help shift the conversation from individual responsibility towards shared concerns.

What this means in practice

When constructing a message about adult social care and support, ask does it:

- suggest that care is mainly a private family responsibility?
- imply that the problem cannot be solved?
- describe social care and support as something that only affects some groups?

If so, the framing may need adjusting.

2.4 Are you using a metaphor?

Metaphors can help people understand complex systems by linking them to familiar, tangible ideas. An effective metaphor should communicate why social care and support matters, how it functions, and why investing in it benefits everyone.

It is important to note that metaphors might not work the same way for all communities, for example people with learning disabilities, some migrant communities, or neurodiverse people. So, when thinking about whether to use a metaphor, consider the target audience.

Several potential metaphors could resonate with the general public. The best metaphors are the ones your organisation can use consistently and comfortably across reports, speeches, stories and everyday conversations.

Metaphors work best when they are used consistently over time. Repeating the same core metaphor helps people build a clearer mental picture of what social care and support is and why it matters. This does not mean every message must use exactly the same wording, or that one metaphor will suit every audience.

Different examples may work better in different contexts, but organisations should try to stay anchored in one or two connected metaphors rather than constantly switching between unrelated images.

Suggested metaphors for adult social care and support:



Scaffolding?



As
glue?



As thread?

A foundation



As building
blocks?



As something
else?



Social care and support as glue

In our group discussions, glue was seen as the most usable metaphor and is one that is also used by **Social Care Future** in England. This metaphor highlights connection, cohesion, and integration, showing social care and support as something that holds society together.

“When social care and support works well, it bonds together the different types of support we need. It strengthens our ability to live our lives fully, keeping us connected to the people and things we love.”

Social care and support as a foundation

This metaphor reinforces social care and support as a core societal function, as essential as roads, healthcare, or education.

“Just like strong foundations make a building stable, strong social care services underpin a fair and thriving society, ensuring that everyone has the support they need to live well.”

Social care and support as a building block

This metaphor focuses on social care and support as a basic component of a well-functioning society.

“Every person’s life is made up of different building blocks: health, education, work, family, community. Social care and support is one of those crucial building blocks that allows people to live independently and contribute to society.”

Social care and support as a thread

This metaphor emphasises the role of social care and support in binding society together.

“Social care and support is a thread that weaves through society, strengthening the fabric of our communities. Without it, there are gaps and weaknesses, but when it is strong, it keeps people safe, secure, and connected.”

Phase 2 Checklist

Once the story and audience are clear, the next step is to build a clear and convincing argument.

Define the problem clearly

- ☐ Have you clearly identified the specific problem you want to address?
- ☐ Is the problem explained in terms people can understand?

Present solutions

- ☐ Does your message include clear and credible solutions?
- ☐ Do solutions appear at least twice as often as problems?

Avoid common framing traps

- ☐ Have you avoided reinforcing: individualism, scarcity, fatalism and othering?

Use helpful metaphors

- ☐ Have you used examples or metaphors that help your audience understand how social care and support works?
- ☐ Do these metaphors clarify the message rather than complicate it?

Call to action

Now is a good time to review your current communications and test them against the ideas in this phase. You may wish to:

- Look at your recent **press releases, reports or social media posts** and consider whether they clearly explain social care and support.
- Discuss with colleagues whether your communications present **solutions as well as problems**.
- Share examples with your **members, staff or partners** and ask whether the message is clear and convincing.
- Read the other briefings and explore the **examples and guidance** at www.reframingcare.stir.ac.uk.

Once you are confident in your message, move on to Phase 3 on **delivering and testing your communication**.