



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 3: Deliver and reflect

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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 have 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 3 is about thinking strategically about your message - who carries it, where it lands, and how you learn from what happens next.

Even strong messages can fail to shift understanding if the messenger lacks credibility, the medium used reinforces crisis narratives, or the message is not tested with the people it is intended to reach.

3.1 Who should deliver your message?

Evidence from other campaigns to support marginalised groups (e.g. [Each and Every Child](#), [Social Care Future](#)) shows that involving people with lived experience of a social issue in constructing and delivering messages is helpful.

Across our learning groups, participants repeatedly noted that the credibility, authenticity and positionality of the messenger often shapes how a message is received as much as the framing itself.

In political contexts, personal experience can sometimes help “detoxify” social care debates by shifting the story from cost and burden towards relationships, contribution and what makes a good life possible.

Supporting people with lived experience to convey the message can improve credibility. There are two important considerations when doing this.

Firstly, great care must be taken in helping people to think about whether they wish to be involved. Resources must be made available to train and support people through the process, and to pay people for their expertise. When using the voices of people with lived experience, or staff, extra care is needed to avoid tokenism, and to make sure that people will not be put in a vulnerable position, especially if their identity will be known.

Participation should always be voluntary, informed and properly supported. People should have clear information about how their story or contribution will be used, where it may appear, and whether they can remain anonymous or withdraw at a later stage. Organisations should consider potential risks to privacy, wellbeing, employment or future support relationships, and make sure appropriate safeguarding, practical support and payment for expertise are in place. Participants have a reasonable expectation that their involvement will have an impact, and it is essential that any outcomes are fed back to them so that they feel their involvement was meaningful.

Secondly, if using an individual’s story, the message needs to make sure that the story is generalised, so that it does not imply this is an exceptional individual, but that the story is an example of a wider, collective problem with social care and support.

What this means in practice

Decide the message you wish to convey. Who is your target audience? The general public? People working in social care and support? People with experience of social care and support? Politicians and policymakers?

What types of people will convey the message most effectively to that audience? For example, people using social care and support, informal carers, care workers, or organisational leaders? The table below outlines some advantages and disadvantages of enabling the voice of different groups.

Messenger	Advantages	Risks / things to consider
People who draw on social care and support	High credibility, lived experience, can challenge stereotypes and humanise the issue.	Risk of tokenism, over-exposure, privacy concerns, emotional burden.
Unpaid carers and families	Can connect strongly with public understanding and show the wider impact of care.	Can unintentionally reinforce care as a private family responsibility if not framed carefully.
Care workers	Trusted voices who can explain how support works in practice, the varied skills required and why investment matters.	Messages can drift into workforce issues alone if not linked back to people's lives.
Organisational leaders	Policy credibility, access to decision-makers, can connect evidence to reform.	Can sound institutional or abstract if not balanced with lived experience.

The best messenger depends on the audience and the message. Often the strongest approach is a combination. For example, lived experience plus leadership, or care worker voices supported by broader system evidence.

3.2 Choosing the right medium

Changing the narrative on adult social care and support is not only about what we say. It is also about how and where people engage with those messages.

Different media reach different audiences, and the outlets we use to communicate influences how messages are interpreted. A policy report, a newspaper article, a community conversation or a theatre performance all create very different experiences for audiences.

For organisations working in and around adult social care and support, narrative change requires thoughtful choices about communications channels. Some types of communication help explain complex ideas, while others build emotional connection or reach new audiences.

The most effective communication strategies combine several approaches, ensuring messages are repeated, reinforced and adapted for different contexts. This is particularly effective when organisations align language across press releases, social media content, events and reports so that audiences encounter a consistent story. The table below highlights several common communication routes and the role they can play in strengthening public understanding of adult social care and support.

Channel	Strengths	Risks	Best used for
Traditional news media	High reach and credibility. Shapes political agendas and public debate.	News thrives on crisis, conflict and short soundbites.	Raising visibility and responding to current events.
Feature journalism	Allows explanation, context and lived experience.	Stories can be individualised if not linked to wider systems.	Humanising social care and explaining how it works.
Social media	Rapid reach and direct communication.	Messages compete and oversimplify. Disinformation can confuse.	Reinforcing key messages and sharing good practice.
Community engagement	Builds trust and allows for two-way conversations.	Smaller scale and slower spread of messages.	Testing ideas and building deeper understanding.
Creative media (art, theatre, exhibits)	Strong emotional engagement and storytelling.	Interpretation may vary between audiences.	Humanising care and challenging stereotypes.

Matching Medium to Audience

Different audiences receive information in different places and formats. Choosing the right medium can support messages about social care and support to be more clearly heard and understood.

Audience	Communication approaches likely to be most effective	Communication emphasis
General public	News media, feature journalism, social media.	Clear explanations and relatable examples.
People who draw on adult social care and support	Community engagement, advocacy groups.	Respectful language and lived experience.
Families of people who use social care and support	Community engagement, local information networks.	Practical information and partnership.
Potential workforce	Social media, education and recruitment channels.	Meaningful work and potential career pathways.
Politicians	Constituency stories and party events.	Evidence, outcomes and public relevance.

No single medium can change the narrative on its own. Effective communication about adult social care and support often combines:

- Explanation through articles, reports and interviews
- Visibility through social media and storytelling
- Connection through community dialogue
- Emotion and imagination through creative approaches

This mix allows organisations to reach audiences in different ways and reinforce key messages across multiple spaces.

Being deliberate about these choices helps ensure messages about social care and support are heard, understood and remembered.

3.3 Testing Your Message

Before finalising a communication about adult social care and support, it is helpful to test how the message is understood by different audiences. Language that feels clear and appropriate to use within the sector may be confusing, misleading or even alienating to others.

Testing messages helps ensure communications are understandable, respectful and aligned with the values that underpin good care. It can also reveal unintended interpretations before messages are shared with the public.

Testing does not need to be complicated. Even informal conversations with a small number of people can highlight unclear language, missing explanations or the assumptions you are making about people's knowledge.

In practice, testing may happen in team meetings, board papers, draft manifestos, social media copy, community workshops or conversations with people who draw on support. The table below outlines why you might want to test messages with different audiences.

Group	Why their perspective matters	What they may notice
People who draw on adult social care and support	They bring direct lived experience of care and support.	Whether the language feels respectful, realistic, accessible, and reflective of lived experience.
People who provide social care and support	They understand how care works in practice and the pressures services face.	Whether explanations of care are realistic and accurate; whether anything important is missing.
People not connected to social care and support	They represent the wider public whose understanding of social care and support is likely to be limited.	Whether the message is clear and meaningful without needing any prior knowledge.
Social care and support leaders and advocates	They understand the wider policy, funding and public narrative context, and often have experience of influencing decision-makers and public debate.	Whether the message supports long-term change, aligns with shared values and strategic goals, and avoids reinforcing unhelpful narratives.

What this means in practice

Testing is most useful when you ask specific questions. The questions below reflect key elements of effective framing discussed earlier in this series.

1. What values and feelings come through?

What values do you think this message is emphasising?

Follow-up: Does it feel fair, universal and treating people with dignity?

2. Is the explanation clear?

After reading or hearing this, how would you describe what social care and support is?

Follow-up: Is anything unclear, confusing or missing?

3. Can you picture what social care and support makes possible?

What picture of social care and support does this message leave in your mind?

Follow-up: Does it help you to see how social care helps everyday life?

4. Does the message balance problems with solutions?

What problem is this message trying to explain?

Follow-up: Does it show how change is possible?

5. Who is social care for, and who benefits?

Who do you think this message says social care and support is for?

Follow-up: Who does it suggest benefits, and who seems responsible for making it work?

3.4 Reflect on your experience of reframing

Communication does not end when a message is published. Messages are interpreted, shared and sometimes changed as they move through conversations, media and networks. Reflecting on how a message travels helps organisations understand what worked well and what could be improved. It also helps identify whether key elements of reframing such as shared values, clear explanations and solutions were retained as the message was shared more widely.

Why does this matter?

You need to know if you are making a positive difference to public perceptions. Learning from what you try means that you can improve every time.

By evaluating over time you will start to learn what “do’s and don’ts” apply to how your organisation, network or sector conveys messages and how your messages impact on different audiences.

What this means in practice

Tracking changes in public perception and understanding over time requires a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture shifts in attitudes, expectations, and experiences (see table below).

	Suggested approach
Short-term (0-2 years)	Track what happens with your message: • Are your reframed messages being reflected by others? How many times the language you use is reproduced or mirrored by others i.e. parliamentary debates, media, campaigns. • Is your language is altered by others? Why is this happening?
Medium-term (3 – 5 years)	Over a longer period, shifts can be measured through: • Trend data provided by the British Social Attitudes Survey on attitudes towards adult social care. • Analysis of media and political discourse can show if narratives have changed, for example towards solutions-focused framing. • Analysis of how social care and support features in national and local policy documents.
Longer-term (5+ years onwards)	The overall outcome of reframing is to encourage solutions to improve the lives of people who draw on care and support. The Scottish Health and Care Experience Survey provides data on the views of service users and carers, showing whether the services are meeting their needs and ensuring human rights are respected.

Reframing works best when organisations learn together. Sharing what is working, where messages are landing well, and where people fall back into older ‘crisis’ narratives helps build a stronger collective approach. No single organisation can shift the public story alone.

Learning from successful reframing

Reframing is not a new idea. There are strong examples of how values-led communication has helped shift public understanding in other sectors. Projects like **Each and Every Child** have helped move public conversations about care experience away from deficit and stigma towards belonging, rights and collective responsibility. **Social Care Future** has helped reframe social care around the idea of “living in the place we call home, with the people and things we love,” shifting attention from services and dependency towards relationships, dignity and everyday life.

Other initiatives show how shared values, careful explanation and collective responsibility can strengthen support for long-term change (see useful resources). These examples remind us that reframing is not about better slogans. It is about building a stronger public story that helps people understand problems differently and see change as both necessary and possible.

Useful resources

Brook, P. (2019) *A framing toolkit: Talking about poverty*, JRF

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/narrative-change/framing-toolkit-talking-about-poverty>

Crompton, T. (2010) *Common Cause: The Case for Working with our Cultural Values* WWF UK

https://climateoutreach.org/content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2015/10/Crompton_2010_Common-Cause.pdf

Each and Every Child <https://eachandeverychild.co.uk/>

Frameworks Institute (USA) <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/>

Frameworks UK <https://frameworksuk.org/>

Heard <https://heard.org.uk/>

Save the Children (2025) *The New Story of Child Poverty In Scotland: A Guide*, Save the Children <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/new-story-child-poverty-scotland>

Social Care Future <https://socialcarefuture.org.uk/>

Taylor, R. (2019) *Transforming Narrative Waters: Growing the practice of deep narrative change in the UK*, Narrative Initiative

<https://narrativeinitiative.org/resource/transforming-narrative-waters-growing-the-practice-of-deep-narrative-change-in-the-uk/>

Phase 3 Checklist

Once the message is clear, the final step is to consider how it will be communicated and what you can learn from the experience.

Choose the most credible messenger

- ☐ Have you thought about who is best placed to deliver the message?
- ☐ Does the messenger have credibility with the audience you want to reach?

Choose the right medium

- ☐ Are your communication channels ones that your audience will engage with?
- ☐ Have you considered combining different formats (media, social media, community dialogue or creative approaches)?

Test your message

- ☐ Have you tested your message with people from different perspectives, such as people who draw on adult social care and support; people who provide social care and support and/or members of the wider public?

Reflect and learn

- ☐ After communicating, have you considered how the message was received?
- ☐ What worked well?
- ☐ What would you change next time?

Call to action

This phase focuses on putting your message into practice. You may wish to:

- Work with colleagues to decide who should deliver your message and through which channels.
- Test draft communications with people who use social care and support, people who work in the sector and members of the wider public.
- Share your learning with partners and networks who are also working to reframe social care and support.
- Continue exploring the resources and background materials on our [website](http://www.reframingcare.stir.ac.uk) www.reframingcare.stir.ac.uk.

Reframing is an ongoing process. The more we work together to strengthen communication, the more powerful our collective impact will be.