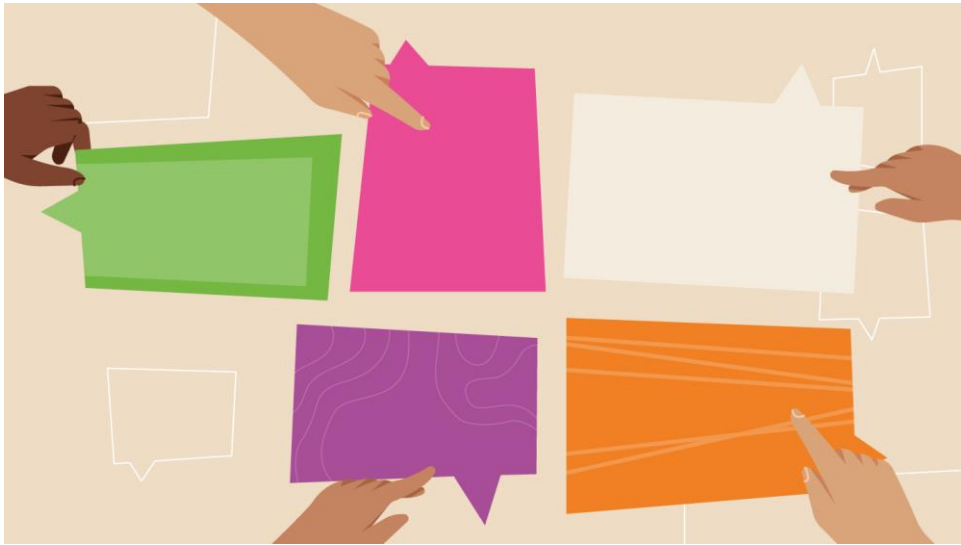


# Influencing public perceptions of adult social care in Scotland: Discussion paper



Richard Brunner & Jennifer Wallace

University of Stirling

May 2025

## Contents

Crafting a stronger story for adult social care in Scotland	1
Executive Summary	2
Introduction	4
1. What is framing, and how does this affect perceptions of adult social care?	6
2. Why do we want to influence public perceptions of adult social care?	9
3. How to reframe perceptions of adult social care	11
4. The power of metaphor	14
5. How will we know if we are making a difference to public perceptions?	16
6. Applying the new frame in practice	18
7. Next steps	21
Appendix: Key questions to be explored with partners	22
References	23

## Acknowledgements

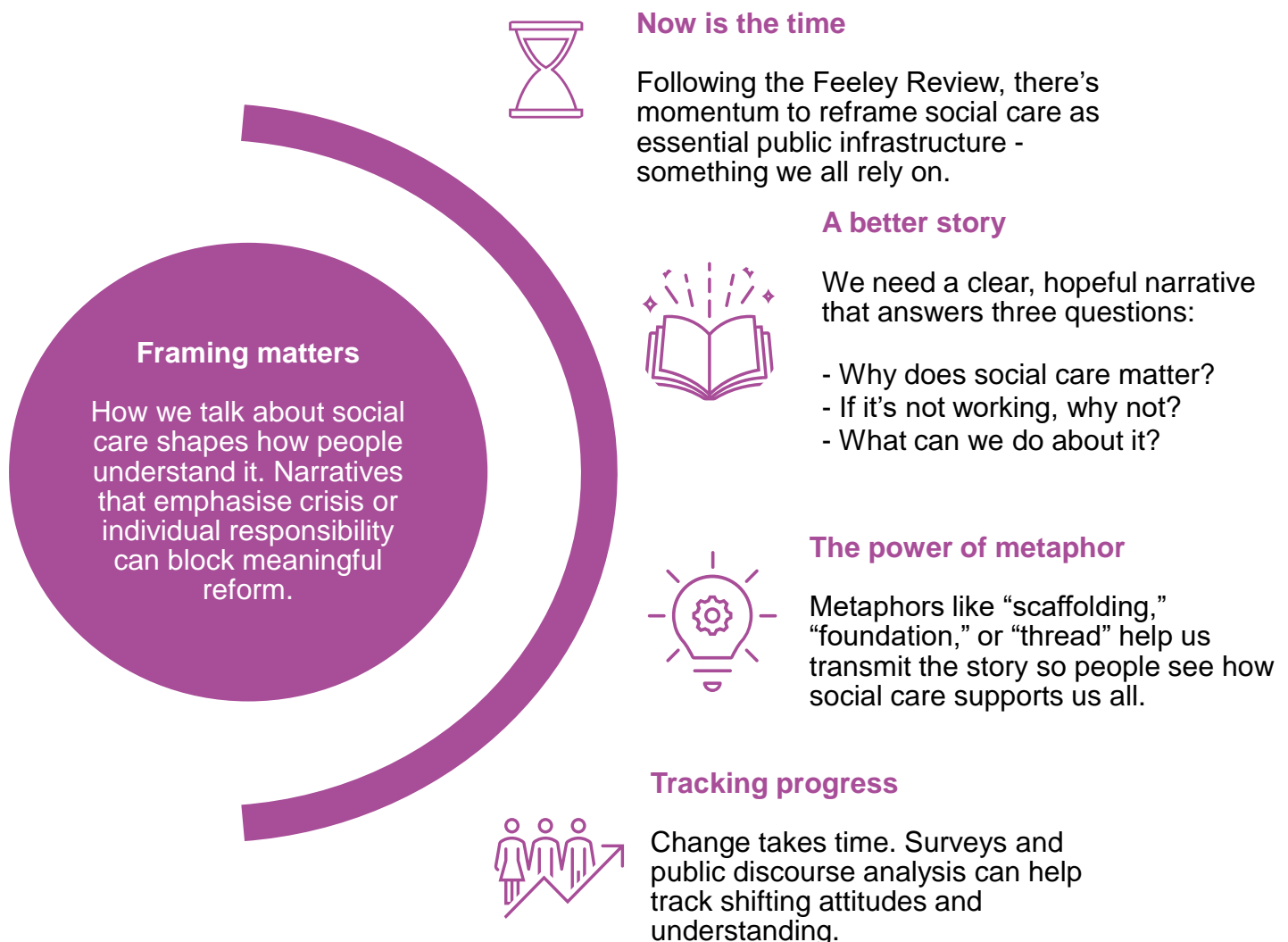
This discussion paper is an interim output from a 12-month IMPACT (the UK Centre for Improving Adult Social Care Together) Demonstrator project on influencing public perceptions of adult social care in Scotland, led by Jen Wallace and Dr Richard Brunner at University of Stirling. The paper draws on an initial evidence review conducted by Dr Janet Heaton (University of Stirling), input from FrameWorks UK, and discussions at a workshop held on the 12 March 2025 with a range of stakeholders from non-governmental organisations in Scotland.

This Demonstrator project was instigated by Scottish Care, and we are particularly grateful to Shanice Shek from Scottish Care for her support prior to and during the 12 March event. Thanks also to: all 12 March 2025 workshop participants, Maria Castellina (FrameWorks UK), the Scottish Storytelling Centre, and IMPACT colleagues, especially Naomi Russell, Kimberley Coutts-Murray, Elizabeth Kennedy, Abigail Villarroel, and Professor Alison Bowes.

## Crafting a stronger story for adult social care in Scotland

Public perceptions of adult social care shape political priorities, investment and public support. Too often, the story told is one of crisis and failure - overlooking social care's role in enabling wellbeing, independence and connection.

This project, led by IMPACT with support from FrameWorks UK, explores how to shift that story. Drawing on research and a workshop with sector leaders, we offer fresh ways to frame social care - highlighting its value, purpose, and potential.



### **What's next?**

Reframing starts now. IMPACT will continue to support partners to test messages, build momentum, and grow a shared, compelling vision for social care in Scotland.

More information: <https://impact.bham.ac.uk/our-projects/demonstrators/public-perceptions-of-social-care/>

## Executive Summary

Influencing public perceptions of social issues matters because evidence tells us that public opinion directly affects political decision-making. Public attitudes towards adult social care in Scotland are influenced by longstanding narratives or ‘frames’ that accentuate crisis and deficiency rather than recognising the role social care plays in wellbeing and independent living.

### *What is framing, and how does this affect perceptions of adult social care?*

‘Framing’ refers to the choices we make about what ideas we share and how we share them. The way issues are framed affects how people view a social issue and what people think can or should be done about it. Common public ‘mindsets’ of individualism, fatalism, and ‘othering’ can limit the potential for progressive, collective change on social issues.

### *Why do we want to influence public perceptions of adult social care?*

The Feeley *Independent Review of Adult Social Care in Scotland* (2021) theme of ‘shifting the paradigm’ offers potential for reframing how social care is perceived in Scotland. The common goal for adult social care post-Feeley is a system that is sustainable, high-quality, and centred on enabling people to live well. Achieving this goal requires building public understanding of adult social care, shifting public perceptions towards understanding it as an essential and valuable service that benefits all of us, and to increase public demand for change.

### *How to reframe public perceptions of adult social care*

Research from FrameWorks UK suggests that effective influencing needs to follow three interconnected stages, creating a compelling, solution-focused story that resonates with the public. For adult social care these questions are:



### *The power of metaphor*

Metaphors help people understand complex systems by linking to familiar ideas. The right metaphor can reshape public perception towards seeing social care as essential, valuable, and interconnected with other parts of society while effectively communicating why social care matters, how it functions, and why it benefits everyone.

### *How will we know if we are making a difference to public perceptions?*

Tracking changes over time requires a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture shifts in attitudes, expectations, and experiences. This can be approached through intermediate measures (0–2 years), medium-term measures (3–5 years) and longer-term measures (5+ years).

### *Applying the new frame in practice*

Reframing adult social care in Scotland requires ‘quick wins’ to start shaping the conversation, and strategic actions to embed changes into policy, practice, and public understanding. There is a need to build and develop a consensual message among allies who are seeking to change the narrative on adult social care through: consistent and unified messaging across the sector; a theory of change; and a long-term approach.

To facilitate dialogue and reflection on the themes explored in this paper, IMPACT will facilitate a series of conversations with key partners over the coming months. The task of shifting public perceptions belongs to us all - and by working together, we can help build the conditions for better social care for everyone.



## Introduction

A central theme of the 'Feeley [Review of Adult Social Care](#)' was 'shifting the paradigm' and the pressing need to challenge existing narratives about social care to maximise its potential for the future. The Review called for a move from 'old thinking' - viewing social care as a burden on society - to 'new thinking,' which recognises social care as an investment. However, the question of *how* to shift public perceptions from 'old thinking' to 'new thinking' was left open.

On 12 March 2025, [IMPACT](#) (the UK Centre for Improving Adult Social Care Together) facilitated a learning-and-action workshop for a small number of social care-interested leaders and activists on how to influence public perceptions of adult social care in Scotland. Drawing on previous work with [Social Care Future](#) and the Association of Directors of Adult Social Care (ADASS) in England, social change experts [FrameWorks UK](#) delivered applied learning for the group on using the evidence-based approach of 'strategic frame analysis' to seek to change perceptions of adult social care. IMPACT then worked with the group, building on this learning to consider next steps. This report is one of the outcomes from that discussion. It highlights:

- ❖ the evidence on current perceptions of adult social care
- ❖ the impact of those perceptions on adult social care
- ❖ how to reframe those perceptions to lay the foundations for changing public opinion
- ❖ potential metaphors to capture the collective impact of adult social care on society in Scotland
- ❖ 'quick wins' and strategic actions to start the process of changing the narrative
- ❖ discussion questions for stakeholders interested in taking forward this agenda in their own organisations, collectively, or both.

Influencing public perceptions of social issues matters because evidence tells us that public opinion directly affects political decision-making. Public support and awareness can drive political action and influence media coverage. The evidence also suggests that changing established cultural narratives is a process that requires a consistent approach, and activities by participants at a variety of levels: there is not a 'quick fix'. We want a future where adult social care is recognised by the public as a necessary, everyday element of Scottish life, collectively benefitting all of us.

Public attitudes towards adult social care in Scotland are influenced by longstanding narratives that accentuate crisis and deficiency rather than recognising the fundamental role social care plays in enabling wellbeing and independence. The British Social Attitudes Survey indicates a decline in public satisfaction with social

care, with dissatisfaction rising from 37% to 57% between 2019 and 2024 (Montagu & Maplethorpe, 2024)<sup>1</sup>.

A national survey of public perceptions of social services in Scotland (sample size n=2,505) found that while over half (57%) of respondents believed they had a good understanding of social care, 43% also identified it as the public service they understood least well (McCulloch et al, 2017). These figures highlight both a lack of public awareness and a growing dissatisfaction with social care that need to be addressed through improved communication and engagement strategies.

---

<sup>1</sup> Additional statistical analysis was carried out that showed no significant difference between respondents from Scotland and those from the rest of the UK. As such we have reported the UK figure.

## 1. What is framing, and how does this affect perceptions of adult social care?

*“Framing refers to the choices we make about what ideas we share and how we share them. This includes what we emphasise, how we explain an issue, and what we leave unsaid,”* FrameWorks UK

**Everything is already framed.** The way a social issue is framed influences the degree of public support the issue gets, and the type and scale of response that is forthcoming. How an issue is framed affects how people view a social issue and what people think can or should be done about it. The Feeley Review’s theme of ‘shifting the paradigm’ offers potential for reframing how social care is perceived in Scotland (see **Box 1**).

### Box 1: Examples of old and new thinking about social care

Old Thinking	New Thinking
Social care support is a burden	Social care support is an investment
Managing need	Enabling rights and capabilities
Available in a crisis	Preventative and anticipatory
Competition and markets	Collaboration
Transactions	Relationships
Variable	Consistent and fair
A place for services (e.g. a care home)	A vehicle for supporting independent living

**How an issue is framed affects how people think, feel and act.** It can drive change or can hold change back. Images and words can drive fear, which can hold back the confidence for social change. If those who want to influence progressive change use the ‘wrong’ frames, they can backfire and even undermine support for change.

There are a set of common ‘mindsets’ that can limit the potential for progressive change on social issues. These are:

- ❖ **Individualism** (problems are seen as individual and solutions become limited to individual change, rather than collective change or system-change).
- ❖ **Fatalism** (problems are too big and solutions are too difficult).
- ❖ **Othring** (the problem is experienced by ‘other’ people, and therefore not the business of everyone; othring is commonly directed towards marginalised groups, for example people perceived as vulnerable, as frail, or as old).



Some studies of public opinion have asked people what influences their perceptions of social care. Most have found that the mainstream media, in the form of the press and TV, were a source of negative information about social care, for example, through their stories on abuse and neglect in care homes and failures in child protection cases (e.g. Research Works Ltd, 2001). People's values and beliefs were also found to shape attitudes to different funding models, such as general taxation, private funding or a mix of both (Bottery et al., 2018).

*"The dominant narrative for progress on social care is limited to more money - not that we could organise the system in a different way."* 12 March 2025 workshop participant

The media, in words and images, tend to reproduce framings of social care as being:

- ❖ **In persistent crisis:** The dominant narrative in the media and public discourse portrays social care as underfunded, fragmented and struggling to meet demand. This crisis framing, while bringing attention to genuine systemic challenges, often results in a sense of inevitability and inaction among the public and policymakers (Heaton, 2024).
- ❖ **Needing to be solved by increased funding:** At a time when all public services are stretched financially, this encourages people to 'weigh up' what they most value (Bottery et al., 2018).
- ❖ **For older, 'frail' or 'vulnerable' people:** Many people in Scotland do not perceive social care as relevant to their lives until they or a loved one require support. This sense of "othering" - where care is viewed as a service for "the vulnerable" rather than as a universal social good - limits public engagement and advocacy for systemic change (Feeley, 2021).
- ❖ **Interdependent with the NHS:** Social care in Scotland is frequently positioned as secondary to the NHS, with healthcare professionals perceived as legitimate experts, while care/support staff and Personal Assistants to disabled people remain undervalued. This perception contributes to underinvestment, both financially and socially, in the workforce and the sector (House of Lords Adult Social Care Committee, 2022).

More widely, social care is gendered and is 'hidden work'. Unpaid carers, predominantly women, provide much of the support within the Scottish social care system. Their work often remains invisible, reinforcing the perception that care is a private responsibility rather than a societal one (Buzelli et al., 2022).

These mindsets and framings need to be acknowledged as part of how the world currently is, but they move us away from solutions-focused conversations. Instead, they lock us into narrow thought processes:

- ❖ **Policy and funding implications:** Negative perceptions of social care contribute to inconsistent funding, policy delays, and a lack of political urgency. The issues in implementing the vision of a National Care Service in Scotland illustrates the challenges associated with securing long-term reform (McCulloch & Webb, 2020).
- ❖ **Workforce challenges:** A lack of professional recognition affects recruitment and retention in the sector, leading to workforce shortages and increased pressure on existing staff. Social care must be positioned as a skilled and valued set of professions to attract and retain a committed workforce (Community Integrated Care, 2024).
- ❖ **Public attitudes and engagement:** Fear-based narratives can generate apathy rather than action. If social care is consistently portrayed as "broken," individuals may disengage from efforts to improve it, believing that change is unattainable (Montagu & Maplethorpe, 2024).

People seeking to 'shift the narrative' on adult social care need to avoid reproducing negative frames in communications and reframe messages to surmount pre-existing public mindsets framed by individualism, fatalism and othering. This should take us towards a position where social care may be perceived differently by the public - not individually, not fatalistically, and not by othering - but as an inherent part of a good society, and as something that we have the collective power to improve.

*"Maria (FrameWorks UK) made me question some of the ways in which we currently communicate - messages of crisis, doom and gloom - and begin to think instead about how we frame those messages in a different way... not diluting the reality but framing it in a way that provided possible solutions."* 12 March 2025 workshop participant

## 2. Why do we want to influence public perceptions of adult social care?

*“Public movements like the Post Office scandal and Black Lives Matter show the power of collective advocacy - how can social care generate similar attention?”* 12 March 2025 workshop participant

The common goal for adult social care post-Feeley is clear: a **system that is sustainable, high-quality, and centred on enabling people to live well**. We need to reframe social care as a vital part of our social infrastructure, comparable to healthcare or education, and essential to a well-functioning society.

To do this, we need to:

- **Build understanding:** We want the public to recognise that social care is about enabling people to lead independent, fulfilling lives in their communities. We need to highlight the range of services, the skilled workforce, and the social and economic benefits of investing in social care.
- **Shift perceptions:** We must move away from seeing social care as a burden on the State to understanding it as a shared responsibility that benefits all of us at different life stages. In doing so, we can build momentum for policies that strengthen social care funding, improve workforce conditions, and expand access.
- **Increase public demand for change:** When people see social care as an essential and valuable service, they are more likely to advocate for it and hold decision-makers accountable.

Communications and messages about adult social care should inspire collective action, showing that better social care is possible, necessary, and beneficial to everyone. This has been demonstrated to be successful in other contexts, as shown in **Box 2**.

## Box 2: Case study example of successful framing

Since 2017, FrameWorks UK has been working with partners in Scotland to end the stigma faced by people with care experience and transform the care system in Scotland. Its research with over 5,500 people showed that the Scottish public struggle to see the potential of a responsive care system. This was closely connected to negative attitudes towards children and young people with care experience.

Through testing, FrameWorks UK found several framing strategies to help shift the dominant narrative on care experience from ‘the forever damaged other’ to ‘what all children need to thrive’. The Scottish partners, with FrameWorks UK, set up the [Each and Every Child](#) initiative to understand and use the reframing strategies, developing a [theory of change](#) to guide the project activities and outcomes. They worked at three levels to centre lived experience and build a network of confident and skilled framing partners by:

- a) Running free framing coaching sessions for individuals and organisations
- b) Providing intensive and tailored support to embed the framing principles in three key organisations
- c) Equipping and empowering those with lived experience of the care system to understand and apply the framing recommendations when telling their own stories.

This has led to the story of care experiences being reframed in the media, at Scottish Government and local authority levels and more. In December 2023, progress was independently evaluated, using interviews and surveys with those directly involved plus findings from a public perceptions baseline study. The independent evaluation found that although ‘the outcomes are ambitious’ - including empowering people with lived experience of the care system to tell their story and seeking to embed framing across the sector - there was ‘evidence of progress towards each outcome’ in the first three years of the project.

See the whole story and links to materials [here](#).

### 3. How to reframe perceptions of adult social care

To change the narrative on social care, we need a strategic approach that shifts public perceptions, builds understanding, and increases support for meaningful change. Research from FrameWorks UK suggests that effective influencing follows three interconnected stages: explaining why social care matters, outlining why it isn't working, and demonstrating what can be done to fix it. Each stage must work together to create a compelling, solution-focused story that resonates with the public.

#### 3.1 Why does social care matter?

At its core, social care is about ensuring that everyone—regardless of age, disability, or circumstance—can live a dignified, fulfilling life with the right support. However, the public often struggles to understand its purpose beyond crisis intervention. To build public support, we need to:

##### **Create understanding at a human level**

People engage with social issues when they see them as personal and relatable. Using stories that highlight the real-life impact of good care helps connect abstract policy issues to everyday experiences.

##### **Tap into helpful emotions**

Hope, fairness, and shared responsibility are more powerful than fear or pity. A message of collective investment in care is more persuasive than one focused solely on decline.

##### **Create shared grounds for action**

Moving from a 'me' to 'we' perspective fosters a sense of collective responsibility. Social care should not be seen as a system for 'others' but as a shared social good that benefits everyone.

##### **Show that society created this problem and can solve it**

Framing social care as a policy choice, not an inevitability, encourages action. When people believe that change is possible, they are more likely to support reform.

##### **Use values to frame the issue**

Values like interdependence, fairness and wellbeing to shape how people think (see **Box 3**).

### Box 3: Potentially useful values to frame social care and influence how people think about it

Social Care Future tested responses to narratives for social care in England based on self-direction (**freedom**), reciprocity (**community**) and security (**belonging**). They found that each resonated with the public but that a balance needed to be struck between them.

Other values that might be relevant are:

- ❖ **Interdependence:** 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 system benefits everyone, not just those who need it today.
- ❖ **Fairness:** Everyone should have the same opportunity to thrive, whether they are older, disabled, or in need of temporary support. Access to good care should not depend on where you live or how much money you have.
- ❖ **Health and wellbeing:** Social care prevents ill-health by offering early support that reduces the need for hospital admissions and crisis interventions and relieves pressure on families, ensuring that people do not have to choose between caring responsibilities and their own wellbeing.

### 3.2 If social care isn't working, why not?

To mobilise action, advocates for change must explain the problem clearly and accessibly. This means:

#### Building buy-in through explanation

People are more likely to support reform when they understand why the system is struggling.

#### Avoiding assumptions of prior knowledge

Public polling shows that people do not fully understand how social care works or how it is funded. Clear, jargon-free explanations are essential.

#### Linking cause and effect

Messages should explicitly show how policy decisions affect social care, using plain language and real-world examples to ensure accessibility and engagement.

Words which explicitly link cause and effect are particularly useful: this leads to, this means, this causes, this results in, and so on.

### 3.3 What can we do about it?



Once the public understands why change is needed, they need clear actions they can support. Effective communication to achieve this should:

**Focus on solutions early**  
People disengage if they only hear about problems. For every one problem, highlight two solutions: the 2:1 approach.

**Make asks relevant to the audience**  
Tailor messaging to different stakeholders (public, policymakers, professionals) to ensure they see the role they can play.

**Use collective, action-oriented language**  
Avoid fatalism and individualism, which make problems seem insurmountable. Instead highlight successful models, new policy ideas, and community innovations that show change is happening and possible (see **Table 1**).

**Table 1: Effective communication about social care: practice examples**

	
Social care is something vulnerable people need	At some point in our lives, we all rely on care - whether for ourselves, our family, or our community
Social care is a financial burden on taxpayers	Investing in social care creates jobs, supports families, and strengthens our economy - just like the NHS or education
The care system is collapsing	Without proper investment, we risk longer wait times and fewer staff - making it harder for people to get the care they need
Social care is a postcode lottery	No matter where you live, you should have access to good quality social care. Right now, funding differences mean that's not always the case
The system is broken	Other countries have made social care work better - Scotland can do the same with the right investment and policies
We don't have enough money for social care	Reforming social care funding now will save money in the long run - preventing crises and reducing pressure on the NHS
People don't want to work in care anymore	By making care a respected and well-paid profession, we can ensure we have the skilled workforce we need



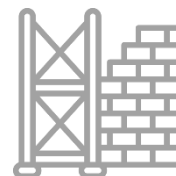
#### 4. The power of metaphor

Metaphors help people understand complex systems by linking them to familiar, tangible ideas. The right metaphor for social care can reshape public perception, shifting it from a system in perpetual crisis to one that is essential, valuable and interconnected. An effective metaphor should communicate why social care matters, how it functions, and why investing in it benefits everyone. Several potential metaphors could resonate with the public:



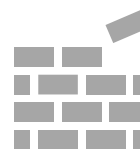
**Social care as glue:** “When social care works well, it bonds together the different types of support we need if we face a disability or health condition. It strengthens our ability to live our lives fully, keeping us connected to the people and things we love.” This metaphor highlights connection, cohesion, and integration, showing social care as something that holds society together.

**Social care as scaffolding:** “Social care provides the structure and support that allows people to build and rebuild their lives after illness, disability, or other challenges.” Like scaffolding around a building, social care is temporary for some and permanent for others, but effective social care always serves to uphold independence and dignity.



**Social care as a foundation:** “Just like strong foundations make a building stable, a strong social care system underpins a fair and thriving society, ensuring that everyone has the support they need to live well.” This metaphor reinforces social care as a core societal function, as essential as roads, healthcare, or education.

**Social care as a building block:** “Every person’s life is made up of different building blocks—health, education, work, family, community. Social care is one of those crucial blocks that allows people to live independently and contribute to society.” This metaphor focuses on social care as a fundamental component of a well-functioning society, reinforcing its importance in enabling people to thrive.



**Social care as a thread:** Inspired by [Karen Hedge’s analogy](#), this metaphor positions social care as the 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.



To ensure the most effective metaphor, examples could be tested with stakeholders and the Scottish public. This research could explore:

- ❖ Which metaphors create the strongest sense of connection and urgency?
- ❖ Which metaphors help people understand social care's role in their own lives, not just for "other people"?
- ❖ Which metaphors encourage public support for investment and reform?

By rigorously testing different metaphors, campaigners and policymakers can ensure that social care communications are evidence-based, compelling, and capable of shifting public attitudes toward lasting change.

## 5. How will we know if we are making a difference to public perceptions?

*“If we’re talking about 10 years to bring about the change we discussed, we need to get some younger people on board to ensure our work has longevity and will stick.”*  
12 March 2025 workshop participant

*“I don’t think it will be meaningful or have any impact if it doesn’t align with what other organisations/people in the sector say about the issues that we are campaigning about.”* 12 March 2025 workshop participant

Tracking changes over time requires a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture shifts in attitudes, expectations, and experiences. This can be approached through intermediate (0–2 years) and medium-term (3–5 years) measures, each providing insights into the evolving public discourse around adult social care in Scotland.

### 5.1 Intermediate measures (0–2 Years)

In the short term, public perception can be assessed through surveys, discourse analysis, and service user and carer views. These methods provide an immediate snapshot of attitudes and help identify emerging trends.

- ❖ **Public Opinion (Omnibus) Surveys:** Representative surveys could gauge public attitudes towards social care. Benchmarking responses against previous surveys would enable some tracking of trends, filling the gap in knowledge, as official statistics are often 12 months out of date by the time of publication. Measuring public support for policy reforms, such as increased investment in social care or integration with health services, can indicate evolving views on social care.
- ❖ **Political and Public Discourse Analysis:** Examining how social care is framed in Scottish Parliament debates, media editorials, and advocacy campaigns can highlight shifts in narrative and public priorities. Sentiment analysis could help quantify positive or negative attitudes towards key issues in social care.

## 5.2 Medium-term measures (3–5 Years)

Over a longer period, deeper shifts in public attitudes can be assessed through changing social norms around social care.

- ❖ **British Social Attitudes Survey analysis:** The trend data provided by the BSAS would allow tracking of sustained shifts in attitudes towards adult social care.
- ❖ **Trust and Confidence Indices:** Public trust barometers can be used to assess confidence in care services, local authorities, and the workforce over time. Further work would be needed to identify whether existing tools are sufficient for adult social care.
- ❖ **Media Framing Studies:** Content analysis of news coverage, documentaries, and political discourse can indicate whether narratives around adult social care have changed, particularly towards more solutions-focused or positive framing.
- ❖ **Civic Engagement Trends:** Tracking how often social care issues feature in local and national consultations, citizen panels, or political manifestos can reflect the issue's prominence in public debate.

A mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative measures, is essential for a comprehensive understanding of public perception. By capturing both short-term discourse shifts and longer-term attitudinal changes, policymakers and service providers in Scotland can take an informed approach to strengthening public trust, perception and satisfaction with adult social care.

## 5.3 Longer-term impact (5+ years)

The overall impact of a shift in narrative framing would not be seen just in attitudes and sentiment but measured by the sustainability and success of the adult social care system. When talking about this work, most of our stakeholders linked it directly to their hope for a better future for people who use social care services.

- ❖ **Service User and Carer Feedback:** The Scottish Health and Care Experience Survey provides annual information on the views of service users and carers, essential to understanding whether the services are meeting their needs and ensuring human rights are respected.

## 6. Applying the new frame in practice

*“Partners can all say slightly different things – but all keep in the same overall direction.”* FrameWorks UK

Reframing adult social care in Scotland requires both immediate interventions and longer-term systemic work. ‘Quick wins’ can start shaping the conversation today, while strategic actions will embed changes into policy, practice, and public understanding. Individual organisations and networks can immediately use the learning from this workshop to start to communicate in new ways with a new narrative about why social care matters, how it functions, and why investing in it benefits everyone.

However, a collective voice is more powerful than isolated efforts. Action is also needed to build and develop a consensual message among partners and allies that are concerned to collectively seek to change the narrative on adult social care. ‘Quick win’ and medium-term actions for individual organisations/networks and for partners/allies are listed in **Box 5**.

Reframing public perceptions towards seeing adult social care as an essential and valuable service that benefits all of us - and therefore increases public demand for change needs:

- ❖ consistent and unified messaging across the sector
- ❖ a theory of change, and
- ❖ a longer-term approach.

At the workshop, people felt that IMPACT could continue to provide a useful role as a facilitator of this process in the short-and medium-term.

*“I think the best thing IMPACT can do is hold the space for the dialogue on this issue, with a pointed focus on action/change. As was said on the day, there is no other existing space for that conversation... You bring a neutrality and credibility as well as a small amount of resource to this type of work.”*

*“[IMPACT can] create a facilitated space for us to mobilise on shared framing please! It’s very easy to deprioritise things if someone isn’t actively organising it.”*

12 March 2025 workshop participants

## Box 5: Reframing activities for individual organisations/networks and for partners/allies

Things to do within your individual organisation/network
Communications and actions can be taken now within individual organisations and networks that draw on the learning from this workshop and start to express a narrative about why social care matters, how it functions, and why investing in it benefits everyone.
Quick Wins
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ <b>Improve media representation of social care:</b> Many media outlets rely on outdated stock images that reinforce old thinking about social care (e.g. passive, dependent individuals in care homes). Organisations and allies can proactively provide alternative images that reflect modern, community-based, person-centred care.</li><li>❖ <b>Adopt the 2:1 rule in organisational communications:</b> For every problem raised, include at least two clear, solution-focused messages to maintain hope and avoid fatalism.</li><li>❖ <b>Update internal and external language:</b> Review your reports, social media posts, and public statements to ensure they reflect new framing, avoiding individualising or crisis-driven narratives.</li><li>❖ <b>Challenge harmful narratives in media coverage:</b> Engage with journalists and broadcasters when stories reinforce “frail and vulnerable” frames, offering alternative perspectives and case studies that showcase independence and agency.</li></ul>
Medium-term strategic activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❖ <b>Embed reframing in organisational strategy:</b> Ensure that policy, advocacy, and public engagement work consistently reinforce new narratives around social care as essential infrastructure, a system of interdependence, and a tool for fairness.</li><li>❖ <b>Create long-term relationships with media outlets:</b> Work with journalists and editors to challenge misconceptions and promote better narratives around social care.</li></ul>

## Things to do with partners/allies

There are collective activities that are needed to build and develop a consensual message among allies that are seeking to change the narrative on adult social care. These include 'quick wins' and medium-term strategic work to be done together.

### Quick Wins

- ❖ **Coordinate messaging with allies:** Ensure organisations working in social care align their communications, reinforcing common themes of interdependence, fairness, and wellbeing.
- ❖ **Use collective language:** Encourage consistent terminology across organisations to reinforce social care as a shared, rather than individual, responsibility.
- ❖ **Train staff and partners on effective framing:** Develop a toolkit for internal use and sector-wide adoption on how to communicate social care in ways that build public support.

### Medium-term strategic activities

- ❖ **Develop a shared social care communications strategy:** Align key sector organisations on consistent framing, terminology, and visuals to ensure a unified public message.
- ❖ **Run joint public campaigns:** Work collectively to shift the narrative on social care through targeted storytelling, events, and media engagement.
- ❖ **Commission public testing of metaphors and messaging:** Work with FrameWorks UK to test framing approaches with the Scottish public to ensure the most effective narratives are used.
- ❖ **Develop a shared monitoring, evaluation, and impact strategy:** To encourage shared ownership of the shift in public perceptions, align monitoring and evaluation and celebrate each other's contributions.
- ❖ **Engage politicians with solution-focused briefings:** Provide local Councillors/MPs/MSPs with concise, well-framed arguments that move from crisis language to opportunities for reform, shifting focus from "who pays?" to "what do we gain from investing in care?" and reinforcing social care as essential infrastructure.
- ❖ **Challenge the 'implementation gap' in policy framing:** Many policies use progressive language (community, citizenship, rights) but are implemented in individualised, restrictive ways. Work with government and practitioners at all levels to align policy with practice.
- ❖ **Address the structural incentives that reinforce outdated narratives:** Current funding criteria force social workers to "game the system" by emphasising frailty and crisis to secure support. Advocating for systemic eligibility, assessment and funding reforms can prevent these perverse incentives from driving 'old thinking'.

## 7. Next steps

*“It would be useful for organisations/individuals to work on joint messaging/campaigns that use some of the framing approaches.”*

*“I would like us to have more time together, as a group of people who can try and work out some key messages which we could use to influence the way social care support is viewed and understood.”*

*“The next Scottish election presents a crucial opportunity to influence policy and public perception.”*

12 March 2025 workshop participants

The work of reframing adult social care in Scotland is still in its early stages, but the energy and appetite for change are clear. This Demonstrator project has laid important groundwork by bringing together diverse voices, surfacing a shared ambition, and identifying practical strategies for reshaping the narrative. There is a strong case for building on this momentum.

In the months ahead, IMPACT will continue to support partners to act on the learning captured here - facilitating collaboration, fostering alignment, and sharing tools that enable consistent, values-led communication. To enable dialogue and reflection on the themes explored in this paper, IMPACT will facilitate a series of conversations with partners in Scotland. Key themes to be explored are outlined in **Appendix 1**.

We invite organisations, networks and individuals across the sector to join this effort: to test new framing approaches, challenge unhelpful narratives, and advocate for a vision of social care as an essential, inclusive infrastructure that benefits everyone. The task of shifting public perceptions belongs to us all - and by working together, we can help build the conditions for better social care for everyone.



### Join the conversation

Be part of building a stronger narrative. Let's work together to reshape how Scotland sees social care.

## Appendix: Key questions to be explored with partners

### **Understanding the Current Frame**

What does the public currently think about social care in Scotland?

What dominant narratives and assumptions shape public perceptions?

Are these narratives helping or hindering meaningful reform of social care?

### **Shaping a More Effective Narrative**

What values should be centred when talking about social care?

How relevant is the Feeley 'old thinking' to 'new thinking' now? Is this the message of progressive, collective change that we want to frame?

How can we emphasise interdependence and fairness instead of crisis and burden?

What metaphors can best illustrate the importance of social care?

### **Framing for Policy Change**

How can social care be positioned as a social investment rather than a cost?

How do we ensure language in policy aligns with the new narrative?

What role should different stakeholders play in reinforcing this narrative?

### **Engaging the Public**

How do we shift social care from being seen as a service for 'others' to a shared societal responsibility?

What kinds of stories can help change public perceptions?

How can we engage different audiences effectively?

### **Measuring Success**

What indicators can be used to track shifts in public perception?

How can we assess whether new narratives are resonating with key audiences?

Are there ways to track how new narratives impact on social care provision and on outcomes for people that use social care?

What feedback mechanisms can be built to refine messaging over time?



## References

- Bottery, S., Varrow, M., Thorlby, R. and Wellings, D. (2018) *A fork in the road: Next steps for social care funding reform: The costs of social care funding options, public attitudes to them – and the implications for policy reform*, London: The Health Foundation. <https://www.health.org.uk/reports-and-analysis/reports/a-fork-in-the-road-next-steps-for-social-care-funding-reform>
- Buzelli, L., Cameron, G., Duxbury, K., Gardner, T., Rutherford, S., Williamson, S. and Alderwick, H. (2022) *Public perceptions of health and social care: What the new government should know*, London: The Health Foundation. <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/reports/public-perceptions-of-health-and-social-care-what-government-should-know>
- Community Integrated Care (2024) *Unfair to Care*. <https://www.unfairtocare.co.uk/#report>
- Feeley, D. (2021) *Independent Review of Adult Social Care in Scotland*, Edinburgh. <https://www.gov.scot/groups/independent-review-of-adult-social-care/>
- Heaton, J. (2024) *Changing Perceptions of Social Care*. IMPACT/University of Stirling.
- House of Lords Adult Social Care Committee (2022) *A “gloriously ordinary life”: Spotlight on adult social care*. London: House of Lords. <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/31917/documents/193737/default/>
- McCulloch, T. and Webb, S. (2020) *What the Public Think About Social Services: A Report from Scotland*. [https://researchonline.gcu.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/27558110/S.Webb\\_What\\_the\\_public\\_think\\_about\\_social\\_services\\_171218.pdf](https://researchonline.gcu.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/27558110/S.Webb_What_the_public_think_about_social_services_171218.pdf)
- McCulloch, T., Webb, S. and Clarke, D. (2017) *What the public think about Scottish social services and why*. [WhatthePublicthinkaboutScottishsocialservicesandwhy-1.pdf](#)
- Montagu, I. and Maplethorpe, N. (2024) *Five years of unprecedented challenges: The impact of the 2019-2024 Parliament on public opinion*, London: National Centre for Social Research. <https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/BSA%2041%20Five%20years%20of%20unprecedented%20challenges.pdf>
- National Centre for Social Research (2025) *British Social Attitudes Survey, 2022*. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 9283. <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-9283-1>
- Research Works Ltd. (2001) *Perceptions of Social Work and Social Care: Report of Findings*. Prepared for COI Communications on behalf of Department of Health: London.
- Scottish Government (2024) *Health and Care Experience (HACE) survey - further analysis of care experience*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/health-and-care-experience-hace-survey-further-analysis-of-care-experience/>