

**“Good support isn’t just about
‘services’ – it’s about having a life.”**



Changing Perceptions of Social Care

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INTRODUCTION

There is increasing recognition that public understanding of the role and value of social care needs to be improved in the UK. For example, since 2018, the [Social Care Future](#) movement has been campaigning to change the ways in which people think about social care in the UK ([#socialcarefuture](#)). Major policy reviews of adult social care in Scotland (Feeley, 2021) and England (House of Lords Adult Social Care Commission, 2022) have respectively highlighted issues with the ‘default narrative’ about social care and the ‘invisibility’ of adult social care in policy and politics. In 2023, [Scottish Care](#), a membership organisation representing independent social care services in Scotland, launched a [campaign](#) to raise the profile of social care in care homes and homecare in Scotland ([#shinealight](#) and [#careaboutcare](#)). In 2024, [Social Work England](#) launched its ‘[Change the Script](#)’ campaign, calling on the entertainment industry to more accurately reflect the reality of social work. The [Association of Directors of Adult Social Services](#) (ADASS) is also in the process of developing a communications strategy to implement its roadmap for reforming care and support in England (ADASS 2024; Dixon and Jopling, 2023).

These developments have been informed by a small but growing literature on narrative change – what it is, the theory behind it, and how it has been and might be used in different contexts. A key contributor to this field of research is the [FrameWorks Institute](#), a communications agency founded in the US in 1999, with a sister organisation in the UK since 2021. It developed an approach called ‘Strategic Frame Analysis’ that is focussed on narrative models and forms (FrameWorks, 2020, 2021). The approach has been used by a number of organisations to try and change the ways in which people think about a range of topics, including climate change (FrameWorks Institute and Heard, 2020), health disparities in rural areas of America (Miller *et al.*, 2024), poverty in the UK (FrameWorks, UD; Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Rights Evaluation Studio, 2023), and the children’s care system in Scotland (Busso *et al.*, 2018; Pineau *et al.*, 2018; Pineau and Busso, 2020). The [Heard](#) charity has also worked with the FrameWorks Institute to support organisations to develop stories that inspire change. It recently published a review of the narrative change landscape in the UK, exploring how the approach might have more real-world impact (Heard, with Dorrans, 2022).

Aims of this evidence review

Building on these developments, this report describes the findings of an evidence review conducted as part of an IMPACT implementation project carried out in partnership with Scottish Care. The review aimed to locate and summarise published evidence on three related topics:

1. Perceptions of adult social care in the UK by the public and other influential groups.
2. Representations of adult social care in the UK in the media and other sources.
3. Existing approaches to changing narratives about adult social care in this context.

It sought evidence on these topics from academic and grey literature containing insights into public understanding, practice-based knowledge and people’s lived experience of adult social care. For the purposes of the review, ‘social care’ is widely defined and includes social work and social services.

METHODS

Searches for relevant publications were conducted in July 2024 using a range of sources.

Research studies were located through searching four academic databases: Arts and Humanities Citation Index; Social Science Citation Index; Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts; and Social Policy and Practice. These searches were supplemented using Google Scholar and Google search engines for both academic and grey literature.

Additional searches were also conducted for reports on the websites of relevant organisations. Some works were also identified by stakeholders involved with the project and through backward- and forward-citation searching.

Different combinations of search terms were used and adapted for the different sources. The key terms included: social care, social work, social services, perceptions, attitudes, opinions, representations, narratives, discourse and imagery.

To be eligible for inclusion in the review, publications needed to contain discrete evidence relating to adult social care in the UK and one or more of the topics of interest. Publications were excluded if they were about children’s social care or were published before 2000. Only the most recent reports of longitudinal surveys of public opinions on social care were included.

After screening titles and abstracts, candidate texts were read to check their eligibility and relevance. Relevant findings and insights from the final selection of publications were noted and are summarised in this report.

Limitations

This review encompasses the literature on *public* perceptions of adult social care, including some national surveys with large samples that include people with and without experience of social care. However, it does not cover the wider literature on *user* experiences of accessing or using services, which in some cases is likely to include material on this group’s prior understanding of adult social care and the factors that influence their perceptions before their contact with services.

Research on the perceptions and representations of children’s social care was outside the scope of the review, although evidence on how this influences the ways in which adult social care is perceived was considered.

The focus of some of the publications was on other topics and only relevant sections were reviewed. Other publications were not academic studies and/or contained very little methodological information. For these reasons, the quality of the evidence was not assessed.

Finally, it was not always easy to distinguish if evidence related to adult social care or children’s social care or social care in general. While every effort has been made to focus on material relating to adult social care, there may be some conflation in the analysis.

FINDINGS

A total of 31 publications, published between 2001 and 2024, were found to contain relevant evidence. The majority were reports in the grey literature; only six were published in academic peer-reviewed journals. They included works by research teams, non-governmental organisations, campaign groups, professional bodies, and government committees and independent inquiries. Six reports were linked to a programme of work by the Social Care Future movement and three others to research commissioned by Social Work England. Another four reports were based on data from two studies. A profile of the publications is provided in a table in the Appendix.

The publications contained evidence on adult social care, social work and/or social services (as defined by the authors), relating to one or more parts of the UK. For brevity, these will be referred to collectively as ‘social care’, except when describing findings relating specifically to social work or social services.

Perceptions of social care

Public perceptions

Evidence on public perceptions of social care in the UK was found in publications covering the whole of the UK or Britain, and each of the devolved nations, except Northern Ireland.

The evidence was mainly derived from surveys of public opinion on social care. These covered a range of topics, including general perceptions of social care; social care funding; pay for social care workers; and the conduct and competence of social workers. Some of these publications also focussed on ‘post-pandemic’ perceptions of the above topics. Related evidence was also found on social care professionals’ views on how the public perceives them, healthcare workers’ views of social workers, and politicians’ views on social care workers’ pay and parity with other workers.

It is important to note that many of the so-called ‘public’ opinion studies were based on data from large national surveys that included a mix of respondents who did and did not have experience of using social care (as well as those who work in social care). For example, the British Social Attitudes survey asks if respondents have had direct contact with various health and social care services in the past 12 months. While some of the reports distinguished the views of users and non-users of social care in the data analysis (e.g. Jeffries *et al.*, 2024), this was not always the case (and few distinguished the views of social care workers). The following summary of findings regarding ‘public’ opinion as reported in the literature should be read with this caveat in mind.

Awareness and understanding of social care

The public were generally found to have low levels of awareness and understanding of what social care is, what social care professionals do, the differences between health and social care, the differences between social care and social work, and how social care is funded (e.g. Research Works Ltd, 2001 Davidson and King, 2005; Institute for Public Policy Research and Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2010; Ipsos MORI, 2011; Penhale and Young, 2015; Bottery *et al.*, 2018; Crowther and Quinton, 2021; Buzelli *et al.*, 2022). They also had misconceptions about how social care was funded, with many believing it to be free or more generous than it is (e.g. Institute for Public Policy Research and Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2010; Bottery *et al.*, 2018). Some studies found that the public

thought that social work was generally for vulnerable people and that the majority associated it with supporting children and families (e.g. CRD Research, 2020). People with experience of social care tended to have higher levels of understanding than those without (e.g. Penhale and Young, 2015; McCulloch *et al.*, 2017; Bottery *et al.*, 2018; McCulloch and Webb, 2020).

The lack of public understanding of social care is an issue that has been recognised for some time. In 2010, the existing level of public knowledge was noted to be insufficient to enable an informed debate on the future of social care (Institute for Public Policy Research and Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 2010). In 2011, a literature review conducted for the Commission on Funding of Care and Support found a clear information gap in people’s understanding about social care funding (Ipsos MORI, 2011). In 2018, The Health Foundation suggested that:

‘There needs to be a clearer articulation to the public of where we are now, breaking down the misconceptions [about future social care funding] and presenting an unvarnished picture of the challenges faced. This must be seen as a communications challenge as much as anything else’ (Bottery *et al.*, 2018: p. 48).

More recently, there have been calls by the Social Care Future movement and others to not only improve public understanding of social care but to develop and promote positive narratives about social care that are more likely to win public support (e.g. Crowther, 2019; Crowther and Quinton, 2021; Social Care Future, 2021a).

A notable exception to these findings was found in research on the public opinion in one of the devolved nations of the UK. A national survey of public perceptions of social services in Scotland (sample size n=2,505) found that over half the respondents (57%) thought they had a good or very good understanding of social services. However, 43% also indicated it was the public service they understood least well, compared to health, education and policing (McCulloch *et al.*, 2017; McCulloch and Webb, 2020).

(Dis)satisfaction with social care

The publications included national studies where the public was asked to rate their satisfaction with social care. Overall, there was evidence of growing dissatisfaction with social care in the UK and Britain as a whole; however, there was also some evidence of possible variation by region, particularly in Scotland.

In Britain, a recent examination of trends in public opinion between 2019–2024 using data from the British Social Attitudes survey found that, over this five-year period, levels of dissatisfaction with social care services had risen from 37% to 57%, while levels of satisfaction had fallen from 29% to 13% (Montagu and Maplethorpe, 2024).

Another study using data from the same survey found that, in 2023 (sample size n=3,374), dissatisfaction with social care differed significantly by age, ethnicity, monthly household income and political affiliation. For example, those aged 65 or over were more dissatisfied (63%) compared to those who were aged 18–64 (55%); people who were white were more dissatisfied (59%) than those who were Asian (41%) (Jeffries *et al.*, 2024: 25). The main reasons for dissatisfaction were pay, working conditions and inadequate training; people not getting all the social care they needed; and there not being enough support for carers. Just 13% of respondents reported being very or quite

satisfied with social care. Of those who were satisfied, the reasons given were: being treated with dignity and respect by social care staff (62%); the range of services and support available (54%); health and social care working well together (33%); and social care being affordable to those who need it (19%) (Jeffries *et al.*, 2024: 27).

The same study reported that 15% of respondents had used or had contact with social care services in the past 12 months. Of these, 20% were very or quite satisfied, but there was also high dissatisfaction among this group (64%). A relatively large proportion of those without experience of social care also expressed dissatisfaction (49%) (Jeffries *et al.*, 2024: 38).

In the UK, Ipsos conducted a survey of public perceptions and expectations of health and social care for The Health Foundation in 2022, following the Covid-19 pandemic (sample size n=2,068). It too found that the public believed standards had declined and that people with experience of using social care were more positive about standards than those without. It also found dissatisfaction with government policies regarding social care (Buzelli *et al.*, 2022).

In England, a literature review examined public and various users’ views on the conduct and competence of social workers. It found adults and carers with experience of palliative care services had negative views of social work and social workers prior to direct experience with them. It also found that some minority ethnic groups were less satisfied than white British users with social care in England. Issues included educational, language and cultural barriers to obtaining information about services contributing to lack of awareness of services, as well as cultural differences in values, and lack of trust (Penhale and Young, 2015).

In Wales, a national survey (sample size n=2,569) of public attitudes to social care following the Covid-19 pandemic was also published in 2022. It asked people whether they, or a member of their household or close family, had accessed social care services and, if so, how satisfied they were. The results showed variations in people’s experiences. Just over half the respondents were satisfied with social care services they had received for themselves or others, while almost a third were dissatisfied (Williams, 2022).

In Scotland, two national studies focussed on social work (Davidson and King, 2005) and social services respectively (McCulloch *et al.*, 2017; see also McCulloch and Webb, 2020). In the 2005 study (sample size n=1,015), respondents’ general impression of social workers was more positive than negative. Those who had had contact with social work services, either personally or through a family member, were more likely to hold positive perceptions of social workers (48%) than those without (41%) (Davidson and King, 2005).

In the more recent study (sample size n= 2,505), almost half the respondents (49%) had a positive general impression of social services in Scotland, and fewer had a negative impression (34%). Half the respondents (50%) agreed that the provision of social services in Scotland was good, while fewer disagreed (29%); similar views were expressed about local provision. A large proportion of the respondents expressed positive views about the role of social services in supporting the most vulnerable in society (73%) and agreed that social services provide a valuable service to the people of Scotland (71%) (McCulloch and Webb, 2020; see also McCulloch *et al.*, 2017).

In the same study, views on whether social services were delivering in practice were more mixed: 44% felt confident social services would meet their and their family’s needs should it be necessary and 51% agreed that social services were working well with health services to provide coordinated care and support (McCulloch and Webb, 2020; see also McCulloch *et al.*, 2017).

There was little variation in the views of different sections of the Scottish public. However, those with lower qualifications tended to have more negative views than those with higher qualifications; and readers of three broadsheet newspapers tended to have more positive views than readers of two tabloid papers. In this study, 35% respondents had direct experience of social services. Those who had direct or indirect contact with social services were more positive about social services in Scotland than those without (McCulloch *et al.*, 2017; see also McCulloch and Webb, 2020).

The authors concluded that, in general, people were positive about social services in Scotland and believe they perform a valuable public role. They note that the findings *‘suggest that the Scottish public has a more positive view of social services than social service workers and welfare institutions typically perceive’* (McCulloch and Webb, 2020: p. 1146; see also McCulloch *et al.*, 2017).

Respect for the social work profession

Two studies examined the extent to which the public thought social workers were respected in society compared to other professional roles.

One survey of the public in England, conducted in 2020 (sample size n=1,751), found that social workers were generally well regarded. Social workers were thought to be undervalued, under-resourced and deserving of better media coverage; 74% agreed that the value of social work was not fully appreciated. This figure was even higher (78%) among those in the sample with experience of social work (8%) (CRD Research, 2020).

A related follow-up survey of the public in England by YouGov (sample size n=3032) examined if they thought social workers were well respected in society. It found that 44% of the public thought they were. The public ranked social workers above police officers (42%) and bankers (39%) but below doctors (90%), nurses (86%), pharmacists (85%), physiotherapists (82%), lawyers (69%) and teachers (67%). However, the same study also surveyed social workers (sample size n=110) and NHS healthcare workers (n=444). It revealed that only 11% of social workers believed they were well respected in society, which may indicate a possible disconnect with the public’s perception (YouGov, 2023).

In this study, social workers were again found to be over-worked and under-resourced. The majority of the public thought social workers wanted what was best for people (74%) and that they make a big difference in improving people’s lives (62%) and are experts in understanding and meeting people’s needs (53%). However, in contrast with the earlier study, those with direct personal experience of social work were less positive about social work in these respects (although most of their contact was about children and families). A large proportion of the public also thought that social workers did not believe the people they worked with (39%) (YouGov, 2023).

Social care professionals’ views on how the public perceives them

How social care professionals think the public and/or service users perceive their work was examined in four studies. One of the studies was a small qualitative study with a sample of 16 social workers from across the UK. The participants thought the public held negative and inaccurate views of social work (Legood *et al.*, 2016). Two of the studies were conducted by YouGov for Social Work England (YouGov, 2020, 2023). The 2020 study sample included current, former and student social workers in England, examining their views on public perceptions in a survey (sample size n=677) and interviews (n=40). It found that the majority believed social work is not respected by society (76%) (YouGov, 2020). The 2023 follow-up survey of social workers (sample size n=110) also found that only 11% believed their profession was well respected in society. Social workers also believed that other professions were more respected in society than the public thought (except for police officers) (YouGov, 2023). The remaining study was a survey of social care workers conducted as part of a programme of work by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council. The respondents felt that the contribution of social care was not well understood by the public and their work was not appreciated by society (Northern Ireland Social Care Council, 2023).

Healthcare workers’ views on social work and social workers

As noted above, the most recent YouGov survey carried out for Social Work England included a sample of healthcare workers from the NHS (sample size n=444). It found that 26% of these respondents thought that social workers were well respected in society, which was higher than social workers themselves thought (11%), but still lower than for most other professions. Like the public in the same study, healthcare workers tended to think that social workers were over-worked and under-resourced, and that social work was mainly about supporting children and families. They were broadly positive about the integration of social work in healthcare. They wanted to see Social Work England help support social workers in improving how the profession is seen in the media (YouGov, 2023).

Politicians’ views on social care worker’s pay and parity

A study of MPs’ and MSPs’ views on pay for social care workers was carried out by YouGov for Community Integrated Care in 2024 (sample size MPs n=107; MSPs n=19). It found 77% of MPs recognised that current rates of pay for social care workers was unfair and 80% believed that the next government should act to improve their pay, and terms and conditions of work. In the Scottish parliament, 89% of MSPs believed there should be *‘no difference in pay between an NHS worker and a social care worker if they are doing jobs that have equivalent skills, complexity, and responsibilities’* (Community Integrated Care, 2024).

Perceived influences on public understanding of social care

Some studies of public opinion asked respondents what influenced their perceptions of social care. Most found that the media, in the form of the press and TV, were a source of negative information about social care and social workers, for example, through their stories on abuse and neglect in care homes and failures in child protection cases (*e.g.* Research Works Ltd, 2001; Davidson and King, 2005; Penhale and Young, 2015; Bottery *et al.*, 2022). People’s values and beliefs were also found to shape attitudes to different funding models (Bottery *et al.*, 2018).

One national study of the public in Scotland (sample size n=2,505) suggested that the media might not be as influential as generally thought. It found that personal contact with local social services was the biggest influence on general perceptions of social services in Scotland (McCulloch *et al.*, 2017; see also McCulloch and Webb, 2020). Other studies also noted that previous direct contact with services was associated with more awareness of, and a more positive attitude towards, social care (Davidson and King, 2005; Bottery *et al.*, 2018). Indirect knowledge, through family and acquaintances experiences of social care, was also identified as a factor (*e.g.* Davidson and King, 2005).

In a study of public opinion on social work, conducted on behalf of Social Work England (survey sample size n=1,751; 5 focus groups with public), participants had mixed responses to the descriptions of social work that they were given. Some thought that it fitted their impressions of what social work was; whereas others queried elements or thought it presented an unrealistically positive picture of social work. The majority thought there was a case for improving communications about social work for the public. Several respondents spontaneously suggested the idea of a fly-on-the-wall TV series featuring social workers, like ones already broadcast about the police, GPs, hospital doctors and others (CRD Research, 2020).

A YouGov study for Social Work England asked current, former and student social workers in England (survey sample size n=677; interviews n=40) what they thought influenced people’s perceptions of the social work profession. Most respondents indicated that portrayals in the news (*e.g.* TV news, newspapers) was the main influence (82%). This was followed by: fictional portrayals in media (*e.g.* TV dramas) (73%); direct or indirect experiences as a service user (72%); direct or indirect experience of dealing with social workers in a partner organisation (54%); social media (50%); direct or indirect experience of being a social worker (42%); and marketing campaigns (*e.g.* recruitment adverts) (10%). The respondents in this study also mentioned that the way social work is portrayed in the media promotes distrust in the profession (YouGov, 2020: 23).

Representations of social care

Studies of how social care professionals are represented in television dramas and other media have found that they tend to focus on childcare, adoption/fostering and child protection cases (*e.g.* Henderson and Franklin, 2007). There is relatively little academic research on the representation of adult social care in the media. For this review, more relevant evidence was mainly found in reports of research undertaken as part of the *#socialcarefuture* campaign on various media, and in recent policy reviews of adult social care and how it is generally conceptualised in policy and common discourse.

In the media, NGO documents, social media and political campaign materials

One relatively old empirical study compared the image of social work in a sample of 399 articles in the press in the UK and USA, published between 1995 and 1999. The overall content and headlines of each story was rated for positivity, with ten being the most positive and one being the most negative. Based on the ratings, the image of social work in the USA was found to be largely positive (6.45), whereas in the UK it was found to be negative (4.83). Most of the stories were also found to

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be positive in the USA (58%) compared to the UK (13%); a higher proportion of headlines were also rated as positive in the USA (47%) compared to the UK (20%). There were also differences in the types of stories, with scandals being more common in the UK (59%) compared to the USA (30%) (Reid and Misener, 2001).

The ways in which social care is represented in the media and other contexts was the subject of six publications linked to the programme of work by the Social Care Future movement in the UK dating from 2019. These publications included evidence from both in-house research and external research that it commissioned.

The Social Care Future programme of work included a study of representations of social care in documents produced by non-government organisations (NGOs) over two years. The documents included press releases, campaign materials and reports. It found that the prevailing narrative of social care was characterised by stories of the system being broken and failing, under pressure from rising demand and lack of investment, and adding to the pressures of the NHS. The focus was on systemic challenges and on costs, not values. There was also a lack of information on social care and poor contextualisation of the issues. Users of social care were represented as the main beneficiaries, not society as a whole. The government was positioned as the potential fixer of the issues. There was a lack of hope and possibility for change (Crowther and Quinton, 2021).

Social Care Future also commissioned independent research using corpus linguistic methods (for the empirical study of samples of language) to examine how social care was represented in the UK press (broadsheet and tabloid), in tweets, and in political campaign materials during the 2019 general election campaign. It found that, in the press, social care tended to be represented as a system in crisis, adding to the pressures on the NHS, and framed as an intractable problem. Negative metaphors were used such as ‘time bomb’ and ‘black hole’. The tabloid press focussed more on older people than adults or children, representing them as both a cause and a victim of the issues. The accounts of the issues varied depending on the ideological position of the newspapers. In social media, there was a low number of tweets on social care in the period of the study. The tweets also tended to be about older people. In the 2019 general election campaign materials, social care received very little attention compared to the NHS and Brexit. In the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats political party manifestos, social care was also described in negative ways compared to the positive descriptions of the NHS (Corpus Approaches to Social Science, 2020; Crowther and Quinton, 2021).

In 2019, while the above research was underway, Social Care Future published its initial map of the gap between what it refers to as the ‘dominant social care narrative’ and the ‘new story of change’ that it wants to tell. These contrasting representations are shown in Box 1 below.

“Good support isn’t just about ‘services’ – it’s about having a life.”

Box 1: Social Care Future’s initial mapping of the gap in the desired and dominant discourse about social care in the UK

The story we want to tell	Dominant framing today
People of equal worth leading lives of value, that they choose to lead, as part of a reciprocal web of community-based support (mutuality).	‘Vulnerable people’ being looked after by regulated personal care services with ‘life and limb’ support delivered by care staff (paternalism).
Focused on people and communities benefiting from and contributing to great social care.	Focused on the challenges faced by the ‘sector’ in delivering care as a service to people.
Social care is a springboard.	Social care is a safety net.
People with gifts and potential.	People with needs.
We have great ideas for how to better support people to lead good lives, that require a reformed approach and financial investment.	Social care is in crisis and is broken and funding to maintain the status quo is the only answer.
Sustainability.	Plugging the gap/shoring up the system.
Care and support is ‘co-produced’ and requires investment.	National government is the only active agent and needs to fund care.
The growing value to society of great support.	The growing social and financial cost to society of meeting demand for basic social care.
By prioritising social care and reforming our approach we can all reap the dividend of living longer lives.	Demand from older and disabled people for social care is a growing and irresolvable pressure on society’s resources.
Everyone stands to benefit.	Social care is for older, disabled people and ‘vulnerable people’.
Citizens.	The vulnerable, patients, carers.
Social care can support good, ordinary family relationships.	People are divided into carers and cared for.
Rooted in social justice, equality and rights.	Rooted in paternalism regarding those receiving or requiring support and fairness with respect to questions of funding.

Source: Crowther (2019) *Talking about a brighter social care future*. Social Care Future: pp. 10-11. *Reproduced with permission.*

In policy and common discourse

This review would be incomplete without reference to two major policy developments in England and Scotland in recent years – the House of Lords Adult Social Care Committee’s report ‘*A “gloriously ordinary life”: spotlight on adult social care*’ (House of Lords Adult Social Care Committee, 2022) and the ‘*Independent review of adult social care in Scotland*’ by Derek Feeley (Feeley, 2021) – both of which involved the collection of evidence from people with experience of adult social care, social care professionals and other stakeholders, about the current state of adult social care.

In their report, the House of Lords Adult Social Care Committee refers to the paradox of adult social care services being:

‘...largely “invisible” in terms of the essential and increasing role that it plays in sustaining both society and the economy; and, until very recently, in terms of politics’ (House of Lords Adult Social Care Committee, 2022: p. 21, para. 45).

It notes that recent attention has been on the cost of care homes, payment for care and rising shortages in the paid care workforce – whereas the value of enabling people to live good lives is seldom mentioned. It also notes that ‘many stakeholders’ suggested that adult social care was not only invisible but also the subject of:

‘...misconceptions among the general public, who often do not realise the diverse, versatile and positive role that the sector plays in society’ (House of Lords Adult Social Care Committee, 2022: 21, para. 48).

The Committee also notes that current approaches are built on a deficit model – what’s wrong with people and the need to fix them – whereas witnesses state that adult social care is, on the contrary, enabling and transformative. It also notes that the current narrative of social care reflects assumptions about disabled adults and older people being a burden on society.

The Committee argues that there is a need to put in place a more positive vision of social care and the contribution it makes to all our lives. It endorses the Social Care Future definition of social care and the need to ‘change the lens’ and shift away from a transactional model of social care characterised by top-down and paternalistic relationships, to approaches built on partnerships and co-production and which are enabling. It adds that:

‘Changing the narrative and emphasising the positive, transformational nature of good adult social care, and the flourishing relationships which mark best practice, would make adult social care more visibly appreciated. The narrative around social care needs to be shifted in order to increase its visibility’ (House of Lords Adult Social Care Committee, 2022: p. 27, para. 68).

In its conclusion, the Committee notes:

‘In this report, we challenge ourselves as a society to embrace a new and more positive narrative—one in which care and support enable us to live an equal life. By making this shift, we look afresh at the perceptions as well as the purpose of adult social care’ (House of Lords Adult Social Care Committee, 2022: p. 119, para. 439).

In Scotland, the Feeley report also identifies a need for a new narrative for adult social care support, one that replaces the ‘default narrative’ which is ‘too often’ about:

‘...crisis, unsustainability, providing for the vulnerable, staff shortages and underfunding and occasionally even harm’ (Feeley, 2021: p. 19).

The report summarises the paradigm shift required from ‘old thinking’ to ‘new thinking’, shown in Box 2.

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Box 2: Examples of old and new thinking about social care

Old Thinking	New Thinking
Social care support is a burden on society.	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.
A place for services (e.g. a care home).	A vehicle for supporting independent living.
Variable.	Consistent and fair.

Source: Feeley (2021) *Independent Review of Adult Social Care in Scotland*: p. 4.

Approaches to changing narratives about social care

While the need to challenge the current discourse about social care was widely recognised, there were few investigations into how this might be achieved. An exception was one study, in which 16 social workers in the UK were asked how they thought public perceptions could be improved. They suggested three mechanisms: by better self-promotion of the service; by having more government backing; and by having more positive news stories in the media (Legood *et al.*, 2016). However, again the most substantial source of evidence on this topic was again from the Social Care Future movement, who have done the most work on this topic to date.

Social Care Future approach

Social Care Future believes that:

‘...dominant public narratives concerning social care, may be an obstacle to securing support for its emerging vision of what good care and support is, while potentially depressing support for sustainable investment and reform. Drawing on learning from other fields, we wish, through participatory methods and research, to develop and share a compelling new narrative to reframe the way social care is talked about, understood and valued by the public and policy makers’ (Crowther, 2019: p. 6).

To this end, the Social Care Future movement has drawn on the ideas of the FrameWorks Institute about the ways in which narratives are framed to convey messages and shape public understanding of social issues – and how they can be reframed to change people’s attitudes and thinking. Using the framing approach, Social Care Future has sought to close the gap between existing negative perceptions and representations, and to promote the use of more positive language and conceptualisations of social care. It has developed new frames and metaphors, which it claims are based on shared values that are likely to be supported and lead to sustainable change (Crowther, 2021). The theory of change underpinning the Social Care Future approach is shown in Box 3.

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Box 3: Social Care Future’s Theory of Change

If Social Care Future:

- helps to build a deeper appreciation of how to message persuasively with public audiences
- builds capacity, capability and opportunity among people who draw on support and allies to deploy this narrative strategically and engagingly...

...then our movement will be able to deploy a narrative and messages that land and chime with key segments of the public.

If the messages are amplified over a 10-year horizon, through a mosaic of stories, media, through popular culture and in local and national campaigns...

...then segments of the public will default to a new story about care and support as a valuable way to grow, maintain or repair health and wellbeing, of benefit to them, their families and wider society.

Over time, this story will become the ‘common sense understanding’ of the system goals, how care and support should be organised and evaluated, of the problems that demand to be addressed, and what the solutions are. This approach will also help to increase the political salience of investing in promoting the wellbeing of those of us with cause to draw on care or support to live our lives.

If we are able to increase salience and to shift mindsets and understanding, there will be more political and policy space, nationally and locally, to reset and reorientate ‘the system’ in alignment with our vision and values and to command the resources to put it into practice.

By building our movement nationally and locally we will ensure that we have the breadth and depth of relationships, and the interconnection between different movement organisations, to harness this ‘change in the weather’ to push for change at key moments.

Source: Social Care Future (2021a) *A movement for gloriously ordinary lives*: p. 10. Reproduced with permission.

Research commissioned by Social Care Future has shown that, following exposure to the new narratives they developed, people were: more likely to associate social care with words such as independence, community and relationships and less likely to associate it with paternalistic ideas such as vulnerability and compassion; more likely to support the principle of people having control over their lives; more likely to agree that strong relationships are key to living the lives they want to lead; and more likely to agree social care draws together a range of relationships and support (Social Care Future, 2021b).

Although outside the scope of this review, it is worth mentioning that other organisations have worked with the FrameWorks Institute to change narratives in other fields in the UK. For example, the [Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) worked with them to change communications about poverty in the UK, winning Think Tank of the Year in 2018 in recognition of this work (Bennett, 2021). An independent evaluation of the project found that the vast majority of third sector partners who engaged with the evaluation were positive about the reframing of communications about poverty. They credited it with adding more dignity, positivity and effectiveness to their communications. The participants with lived experience of poverty also felt more hopeful and confident about the reframing. The evaluation also identified some issues with the approach, such as with the inflexibility of the framing tools and lack of clarity over who was involved in using them in relation to which target audiences. It suggested ways in which future work might be improved, including through strong planning, having a clear theory of change, and using risk assessments (Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Rights Evaluation Studio, 2023).

A separate review of the project also examined the strengths and weaknesses of the approach. It raised queries about whether the framing of poverty in the UK varies across the devolved nations, whether the messages developed for the public fit with those with experience of poverty, and the degree of control that projects have over the media and the messages it conveys (Bennett, 2023).

Finally, it was noted that creative approaches have been used as part of communications strategies to change the ways in which care is perceived. For example, in the USA, [Caring Across Generations](#) is an organisation working to change cultural attitudes towards care. It works with the [Creative Care Council](#), made up of arts and entertainment creatives, to create stories and advocate for policy change. Other examples of narrative change projects, the range of people and organisations involved in this work in the UK, and some of the challenges involved, have been described by Heard (Heard, 2022). While such projects were outside the scope of this review, they may include evidence and insights that can inform future work on changing perceptions of social care in the UK.

CONCLUSION

This review found a small but growing evidence base on the three topics of interest.

The evidence suggests that, in general, there are low levels of awareness and understanding of social care in the UK, and growing dissatisfaction with social care among the public. However, there is also evidence that the public in Scotland are more aware and more positive about social work and social services than may be assumed. In England, the public also thought social workers were under-valued; they were more likely to think that social workers were respected in society (44%) than social workers themselves perceived (11%).

In general, people with experience of social care were more positive (or less dissatisfied) than those without. There was very little examination of the perceptions of different sections of the public, although there was some evidence of variations in levels of (dis)satisfaction by age, ethnicity, income and political affiliation, and by qualifications and which newspapers are read.

The representation of adult social care has received little attention in the academic literature compared to children’s social care. However, the Social Care Future movement and recent major policy reviews of adult social care in England and Scotland have highlighted issues with the current negative discourse about social care in general, and identified a need for new, more positive, ways of talking about adult social care.

Social Care Future is using the ‘framing’ approach developed by the FrameWorks Institute to change the narrative about social care. This is an evidence-based approach that has been used to change narratives in other fields in the UK and elsewhere. Initial results from Social Care Future’s research suggest that the approach can change the ways in which people think about social care.

Finally, some gaps in existing research were identified, most notably on:

- the values and views of different social groups on adult social care (*e.g.* demographic and ethnic groups; people with and without experience of social care; regional populations) and how these views are shaped and shifted over time (see also Ipsos MORI, 2011);

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- the extent to which general perceptions of adult social care are influenced by stories about children’s social care;
- the ways in which adult social care (in all its forms) is represented in different media, at different times (not only in the run up to political elections), and in each of the devolved nations of the UK;
- a possible disconnect in the views of the public and the views of social workers, with the former valuing and respecting the profession more than the latter appreciate;
- how perceptions of social care are affected by factors such as increasing integration with health care; fragmentation in provision of social care by the public and independent sector; and differences in national contexts and policy (*e.g.* the proposed development of the [National Care Service](#) in Scotland);
- and on whether and, if so, how communication strategies about social care need to be cognisant of levels of trust in the media and other sources of information, and adapted for different audiences, to be most effective.

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Appendix: Publications with evidence included in the review

1st Author	Year	J/Report	Location	Title	Links
Bottery	2018	Report	England	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	
Buzelli	2022	Report	UK	Public perceptions of health and social care: What the new government should know	
Community Integrated Care	2024	Report	England & Scotland	Unfair to Care 2024. Understanding the social care gap and how to close it	
Corpus Approaches to Social Science (CASS)	2020	Report	UK	Social care in UK public discourse	Social Care Future. The results of this study are also discussed in Crowther 2019
CRD Research	2020	Report	England	Perceptions of Social Work: Research among the general public and those with lived experience of social work.	Social Work England
Crowther	2019	Report	UK	Talking about a brighter social care future	Social Care Future
Crowther	2021	Report	UK	How to build public support to transform social care. A practical guide for communicating about social care	Social Care Future. Some of the results are based on the Corpus Approaches to Social Science (2020) work
Davidson	2005	Report	Scotland	Public Knowledge of and Attitudes to Social Work in Scotland	
Feeley	2021	Report	Scotland	Independent Review of Adult Social Care in Scotland	
House of Lords Adult Social Care Committee	2022	Report	England	A Gloriously Ordinary Life	
Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR)	2010	Report	Britain	Expectations & aspirations: public attitudes towards social care - IPPR and PwC social care programme	
Ipsos	2024	Report	UK	Public perceptions of health and social care polling (Wave 5: November 2023)	
Ipsos MORI	2011	Report	England	Fairer Care Funding Supporting documents	
Jeffries	2024	Report	Britain	Public satisfaction with the NHS and social care in 2023 Results from the British Social Attitudes Survey	
Legood	2016	Brit J SW	UK	Exploring How Social Workers Experience and Cope with Public Perception of Their Profession	

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1st Author	Year	J/Report	Location	Title	Links
Manthorpe	2008	Brit J SW	England	‘There Are Wonderful Social Workers but it’s a Lottery’: Older People’s Views about Social Workers	
McCulloch	2020	Brit J SW	Scotland	What the Public Think about Social Services: A Report from Scotland	See also McCulloch <i>et al.</i> , 2017 for the original report of the study
McCulloch	2017	Report	Scotland	What the public think about Scottish social services and why	Report of work later published by McCulloch & Webb in Brit J SW in 2020
Montagu	2024	Report	Britain	Five years of unprecedented challenges. The impact of the 2019-2024 Parliament on public opinion	
Northern Ireland Social Care Council	2023	Report	Northern Ireland	Making it Better: The Voice of Social Care Workers	
Penhale	2015	Report	England	A Review of the literature concerning what the public and users of social work services in England think about the conduct and competence of social workers	
Read	2021	Soc Sci Med	England	Public preferences for paying for social care in later life in England: A latent class analysis	See also Wittenberg <i>et al.</i> , (2024)
Reid	2001	Int J Soc Wel	UK & US	Social work in the press: a cross-national study	
Research Works Ltd	2001	Report	England	Perceptions of Social Work and Social Care: Report of Findings	
Social Care Future	2021a	Report	UK	A movement for gloriously ordinary lives	Social Care Future
Social Care Future	2021b	Report	England	How to build public support to transform social care. Summary of our public audience research	Social Care Future. See also Survation (UD)
Survation	UD	Report	England	How to build public support to transform social care – research report	Social Care Future. See also Social Care Future (2021b) report
Williams	2022	Report	Wales	Public attitudes to social care in Wales following the COVID-19 pandemic	
Wittenberg	2024	J Soc Pol	England	Who should pay for social care for older people in England? Results from surveys of public attitudes to the funding of adult social care	See also Read <i>et al.</i> , (2021)
You Gov	2020	Report	England	A report on the social work profession.	Social Work England
YouGov	2023	Report	England	Public perceptions of the social work profession	Social Work England