

# How to build public support to transform social care

A practical guide for communicating about social care

Neil Crowther and Kathryn Quinton

**#socialcarefuture**





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**By reframing the way we talk  
about social care, it's possible to  
build stronger public support for  
investment and reform.**

# Introduction

This guide provides an evidence-based framework for communicating about social care in a way that builds public understanding of and support for change. It is not a 'script' but the language used here has been developed and tested extensively with public audiences.

A summary of the background research is available in the report, 'How to build public support to transform social care – Summary of our public audience research.'

#socialcarefuture is a growing movement, with a shared vision of a radically different future for what we today call 'social care' – a future where social care exists to support everyone to draw on formal and informal support and relationships to live the lives they want to lead, with meaning, purpose and connection with their community.

Underpinning how social care is presently organised and funded, a significant obstacle to achieving this vision is the way social care is talked and thought about, and the feelings that it generates among the public at large. We can only hope to change social care by changing this narrative.

By reframing the way we talk about social care, it's possible to build stronger public support for investment and reform.

Drawing on best practice in values-based framing, we wanted to see how different framing could change how people think and feel about social care. Our research has demonstrated that by reframing the way we talk about social care, it's possible to build stronger public support for investment and reform. Moreover, it has shown that shifting mindsets towards the vision and approach advocated by #socialcarefuture provides a successful route for doing so.







**A NEW WAY  
TO TALK  
ABOUT THE  
FUTURE OF  
SOCIAL CARE**

Here is a version of the tested narrative in full, using the ‘weave the web’ metaphor to explain the role of social care in people’s lives (see later for other tested metaphors). The research showed that this narrative shifted public mindsets concerning social care in line with the vision and values we wished to communicate, and increased public support for transforming it through investment and reform.



# **Our #socialcarefuture**

## **We all want a good life**

We all want to live in the place we call home, with the people and things we love, in communities where we look out for one another, doing what matters to us.

## **Caring about each other**

If we or someone we care about has a disability or health condition during our life, we might need some support to do these things. That's the role of social care.

## **Drawing on support to live our lives**

When organised well, social care helps to weave the web of relationships and support in our local communities that we can draw on to live our lives in the way that we want to, with meaning, purpose and connection, whatever our age or stage of life.

## **We know how to be better**

There are already places that are thinking about and organising social care differently to achieve this. For example, by supporting facilitators who bring family, friends and neighbours together to support someone to do what matters to them, strengthening the relationships of everyone involved. Personal assistants, employed by people to provide practical support so someone can lead their life their way. And organisations that connect people with opportunities to use their skills and talents, which improves their well-being and benefits the local community.

## **Everywhere and for everyone**

We believe that this can and should be happening everywhere and for everyone.

## **More resources, better invested**

For that to happen, the government must make good social care a priority and begin investing more in it. And more local councils need urgently to start working alongside and supporting local people and organisations to bring these ideas to life by organising and funding social care differently.

**‘By finding a ‘reframe’ we can  
take people on a different path  
of understanding our issue, one  
which corresponds with the  
change we are striving to achieve’**

**Frameworks Institute**

## Why we need to change the story of social care

The way that we currently communicate about social care – with its narrow conception of what social care is and does, and focus on an unsustainable system in crisis – militates against achieving the fundamental changes we want to see. Far from motivating people to act, crisis talk makes the problem seem too big to solve, leading to fatalism and inaction.

That's not to say we shouldn't focus on the current serious problems with social care in our messaging – it's very important that we do – but we need to 'frame' the facts and problems in a way that maximises the chance that they are heard and acted on. And that's where values-based framing comes in. Values-based framing is an evidence-based approach to communicating for long-term social change that connects social issues to people on a deeper level to increase their support for progressive change.

### Mapping the gaps

In November 2019, #socialcarefuture published 'Talking about a brighter Social Care Future', which described the approach and best practice in values-based framing that we have been following, and brought together research into the messaging of campaigners, a look at how print media talked about social care and existing evidence on public thinking about social care.<sup>1</sup> We subsequently commissioned research during the 2019 General Election into how politicians and political parties talked about social care, and into how social care was discussed on Twitter.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Crowther, N (2019) Talking about a brighter social care future In Control

2 Dayrell, C & Semino, E (2020) Social care in UK public discourse The ESRC Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Science (CASS), Lancaster University, UK

This research allowed us to map the gaps between our vision of the future and the dominant discourse about social care that shapes how many people think and feel about it. During the Covid-19 pandemic we have only noticed these gaps widen and solidify, particularly as a result of the tragic situation facing many people who live, or lived in, residential care homes, and through relentless talk of ‘the vulnerable’. Such talk invokes highly paternalistic stereotypes, making it harder to build the case for people to have greater choice and control over their support.

In summary, the current public story characterises social care as caring *for* rather than *about* people and as being kept alive rather than living a life of meaning, purpose and connection.

Since mapping these gaps, our research has focused on how to bring the public closer to our story. That is, how to communicate about social care in a way that builds understanding and support for change among the public. We have worked with strategic communications experts Equally Ours and public opinion researchers Survation to conduct qualitative and quantitative research with the public to test and refine a new narrative.

# **THE NEW NARRATIVE EXPLAINED**



This section explains the new narrative in detail. Importantly, we tested more than one version of the narrative, all of which demonstrated the positive results outlined in the research, hence different versions and combinations can be used.

## 1. Focus on results and lead with shared values



*'We all want to live in the place we call home, with the people and things we love, in communities where we look out for one another, doing what matters to us'*

As the communications expert Anat Shenker-Osorio advises, *'people sell the brownie, not the recipe'*<sup>3</sup> This opening, values-based, hopeful and people-focused statement focuses on life outcomes and in doing so makes the overarching frame about living a good life of our choosing, with meaning, purpose and connection. It positions social care as something that reaffirms our identity, will and preferences – protecting, rather than threatening, the things that matter to us and anchor us in the world.

By starting with life outcomes, it actively positions social care as a vehicle to achieving these ends, rather than as an end in itself, and as happening in the place the person calls home. In this vision people do not 'go into', 'enter' or 'access' social care. Crucially, it avoids any references to a 'service', 'system' or 'sector'.

The vision strengthens people's values of security and belonging, freedom and control, and interdependence and community. It avoids any appeal to paternalistic benevolence and recognises people who draw on social care being both givers and receivers of support to and from their community. It is about people caring *about* and supporting one another, rather than invoking ideas of 'vulnerable people' being 'cared for'. The words 'support' and 'supporting' tested particularly well in the focus groups to describe the function of social care.

3 In *Messaging in this moment* (2017), Anat Shenker-Osorio encourages communicators to focus on outcomes not process and has described this principle as focusing on the brownie, not the ingredients (Centre for Community Change)

Particularly important is its avoidance of ‘othering.’ The headline vision appeals to universal human experience and desires, not mentioning any particular social group or area of ‘need.’ In doing so it speaks to ‘a larger us’, avoiding generating ideas of ‘them and us’, while indirectly invoking equality.

## **2. Explain the role of social care and how it works when organised well**

The next section of the narrative introduces an explanation, employing metaphors to build understanding of the role of social care that we advocate.

**It begins by explaining why we may require support:**

*‘If we or someone we care about has a disability or health condition during our life, we might need some support to do these things. That’s the role of social care.’*

This reinforces the message that social care is about support with living a life that people commonly value (as outlined in the headline vision above). Importantly, it does not talk about ‘older’ or ‘disabled people’ as fixed groups, instead talking about disability or a health condition as something we all might experience during our lives. It also opens out the frame to include those who share their lives with people who require support connected to a health condition or disability. This is designed to further reinforce the universal relevance of social care.

**The narrative continues by explaining how our vision and approach works in practice. Specifically:**

- that when organised well, social care is a made up of a range of formal and informal support and relationships that need to be drawn together around what matters to people
- that people are in control of their support and their lives
- that social care is a means to the end of leading a life one has reason to value.

The inclusion of the phrase ‘when organised well’ is important because it makes it clear that social care can be and is sometimes organised differently, rather than fixed and difficult to change, opening up the real possibility for change.

## Explanatory metaphors

To aid understanding of how social care works in practice, we have developed a range of metaphors. The first three – weaving the web, nurturing the ecosystem, and the glue that binds – work well to build understanding of and support for the idea of social care as a range of formal and informal support and relationships drawn together to support people to live their lives as they wish.

### Weaving the web



When organised well, social care helps to weave the web of relationships and support in our local communities that we can draw on to live our lives in the way that we want to, whatever our age or stage of life.

### Nurturing the ecosystem



When organised well, social care helps nurture an ecosystem of relationships and support in our local communities that we can draw on to live our lives in the way that we want to, whatever our age or stage of life.

### The glue that binds



When organised well, social care acts as the glue that binds together relationships and support in our local communities that we can draw on to live our lives in the way that we want to, whatever our age or stage of life.

We also tested metaphors of ‘vehicle’ and ‘tool’ to convey the idea of social care as a means to other ends, and to reinforce the importance of people being in control of their support and their lives.

## Vehicle



When organised well, social care provides us with the vehicle that allow us to do what matters to us, whatever our age or stage of life.

## Tools



When organised well, social care provides us with the tools that allow us to do what matters to us, whatever our age or stage of life.

During the research, unlike the ‘web’, ‘ecosystem’ and ‘glue’ metaphors, ‘vehicle’ and ‘tool’ did not work as well as part of a standalone message as. However, when used as part of the wider narrative we saw a similar overall shift in understanding and support, suggesting that they can prove helpful when employed in that broader context. Since conducting the research we have also tweaked the ‘web’, ‘ecosystem’ and ‘glue’ metaphor statements to add the phrasing ‘that we can draw on’ to reinforce the idea of social care as a means to other ends in line with the person’s own goals.

During the qualitative and quantitative phases of the research we used both ‘to do what matters to us’ or ‘to live our lives in the way that we want to’, both of which reinforce the importance of choice and control, and of power and agency residing with the person drawing on support.

During the qualitative phase of the research a number of participants expressed strong support for the addition of ‘with meaning, purpose and connection’. This phrase might be helpful if using any of the explanatory metaphors independent of the headline vision, eg:

***‘When organised well, social care helps weave the web of relationships and support that we can draw on to live the lives we want to lead, with meaning, purpose and connection.’***

The inclusion of ‘whatever our age or stage in life’ conveys that our empowering vision of social care is relevant to everyone.

### 3. Offer a believable plan for change

The research showed that to believe that the vision and approach is credible and achievable, people need to see real-life examples of how it works in practice. We used a range of examples in the qualitative and quantitative research. The three used in the quantitative research were Community Circles, Personal Assistance and Local Area Coordination.

**Each amplified the ideas of living our lives as we want to and on drawing on a range of support and relationships:**

*‘There are already places that are thinking about and organising social care differently to achieve this. For example, by supporting facilitators who bring family, friends and neighbours together to support someone to do what matters to them, strengthening the relationships of everyone involved. Personal assistants, employed by people to provide practical support so someone can lead their life their way. And organisations that connect people with opportunities to use their skills and talents, which improves their well-being and benefits the local community.’*

Alternatively, rather than describe different approaches, you might use specific examples of such approaches in action and the change they have brought about. It is particularly valuable to place the voice of those people who draw on social care centre stage in such examples, with people describing the role that these approaches have played in being able to live their lives and to pursue their goals.

### 4. Be clear who is responsible and what they need to do

The final section of the new narrative begins with an assertion that our vision and approach, and the examples of good practice that exemplify it, can and should be available equitably and be the norm rather than the exception. This sentence also helps frame the injustice of the current situation.

*‘We believe that this can and should be happening everywhere and for everyone.’*

It then goes on to say what will need to happen to achieve this, naming who is responsible and their roles and responsibilities, to address an earlier concern that ‘community-led’ approaches could amount to ‘government disowned’ responsibilities:



***‘For that to happen, the government must make good social care a priority and begin investing more in it. And more local councils need urgently to start working alongside and supporting local people and organisations to bring these ideas to life by organising and funding social care differently.’***

Or

***‘The government must make good social care a priority and begin investing more in it. And more local councils need to think differently about how they organise and fund social care, learning from and investing in these new and more effective ways of doing things now.’***

These statements have three components: they say that central government must prioritise social care and begin investing more in it. This acknowledges that more money is required to implement this vision, that it will take time to bring about, but that we cannot afford to delay getting on with it. That is to say, it conveys urgency, but attaches this to starting to build something new, rather than shoring up the existing status quo.

They then implicate the agency of local councils to strike a different relationship with their local communities and to redirect their resources towards this vision and approach. In other words, this vision is contingent on more resources being made available by central government, but not on that alone.

Finally, the first version points to the need to work alongside local people and organisations, while the second emphasises the need to redirect investment towards new models and approaches. Both versions achieved similar results in the research.







# **TIPS FOR TALKING ABOUT SOCIAL CARE**

The following tips are based on evidence-based strategic communications good practice and the research insights.

## When constructing your message:

- **Lead with a values-based statement** to show why social care matters (the tested headline statement is a good example of this)
- **State the current problem(s) with social care** – including who or what is responsible for it – that runs counter to the shared pro-social values in the opening statement. This is where you deploy facts and statistics
- **Show what good social care looks like**, using the tested metaphors to explain the role of social care in people's lives
- **Show how it's possible to organise social care differently** by providing concrete and achievable examples and solutions. This includes stating who's responsible for implementing the change.

Do	Avoid
Tell our new story about what social care is and does	Talking about what's wrong with the current story, as this reinforces it in people's minds
Lead with shared values (combining security and belonging, individual freedom and control and community and interdependence), to show how the current problems with the way social care works run counter to these values.	Leading with the problem. And don't talk about people who require social care as a growing problem. Avoid tapping into values of security or belonging or freedom and control alone
Talk about caring about people and supporting one another to live with meaning, purpose and connection	Talking <i>about</i> 'caring for people', 'receiving care' and 'being looked after' as this diminishes the value of people. And avoid phrases like 'help with washing, eating and dressing'
Talk about people living their lives, as this is what social care is about and why we have reason to value it	Talking about a sector or industry.
Talk about people who draw on care and support to position social care as a means to other ends and to reaffirm the primary importance, agency and control of people	Saying people who 'are in' social care, who 'access' social care, 'our residents', 'our clients' as this frames social care as a place, destination or end in itself and diminishes the importance of people being in control
Talk about 'being at home', 'where the person lives'	Saying 'placement', 'setting'
Say 'we all', 'our' and 'everyone' to build the sense of social care's relevance to us all, not just particular groups of people	Saying 'the elderly', 'patients' and 'the vulnerable' as this reinforces feelings of 'them and us' and diminishes the sense of social care's relevance to everyone

Do	Avoid
Use the tested metaphors to explain the role of social care in people's lives	Using unhelpful metaphors – like 'demographic time-bomb' and 'creaking social care system' – which reinforce the sense of crisis and undermine the possibility of change
Be clear that social care can be transformed for the better – offering concrete examples and a believable plan	Focusing on social care as a broken system in crisis, as this leads to fatalism and inaction. And avoid talking about social care like it's a fixed entity that can't be changed
Name the range of responsible agents and be clear about their roles, responsibilities and relationships. Specifically, be clear that achieving our vision requires both a greater dedication and use of public resources, including unlocking the already abundant resources in our communities	Only talking about central government responsibility as this implies that a greater commitment of national resources towards social care is sufficient on its own to realise our vision, given these resources could continue to shore up failing models
Talk about 'investing in social care'	Talking about 'funding social care'

# Endnotes

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In memory of our friend, colleague  
and storyteller, John Popham

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