







Talking about  
social security  
effectively

**ONROAD**  
MEDIA

A project briefing by On Road Media presenting communications research conducted in the summer of 2022 for Trust for London and The Commission on Social Security

# Recommended quick message for talking about the social security system

More and more people are calling for the government to upgrade the social security system so that everyone — especially those who most need it — can thrive in today's world.

-  = normalise support
-  = centre the system
-  = universal and targeted
-  = update
-  = government responsibility
-  = big up your solutions

## Sample longer message

- Social security is our society's approach to welfare, benefits and state support. The system was designed to support everyone, but as times have changed, the government hasn't upgraded and updated it to meet modern challenges.
- There are a number of ways our government can modernise the social security system so it responds to our society's needs. For example, we can...
- Our government has a responsibility to make changes like these to support us all to get by.

## Key findings

- The cost of living crisis is dominating people's thinking and making people more aware of the structural causes of hardship.
- People are very disillusioned with politics and institutions. They support a stronger social security system but struggle to believe it could actually happen.
- We can talk about the social security system in ways that connect with people and inspire them to feel that change is possible.

# Introduction

The Commission on Social Security has set out a Plan with a vision for a decent social security system for everyone. It's a blueprint for a simpler system that ensures everyone has enough money to live well — and that everyone is treated with dignity, respect and trust. The key proposals are:

- ✓ Introduce a Guaranteed Decent Income

---

- ✓ Raise Child Benefit

---

- ✓ Take a new approach to disability benefits

---

- ✓ Recognise prevention is better than cure

---

## Communications research by On Road Media

In August and September 2022 On Road Media and independent communications researcher Rose Hendricks looked into:

- how public audiences think and feel about the cost of living, the social security system and the solutions proposed by the Commission
- how people respond to different messages on these issues
- how to communicate these issues to build support for the Commission's proposals.

We did this in two online focus groups and an online survey involving more than 2,000 members of the public.

This project briefing is a summary of our findings and recommendations.

## Current perspectives among members of the public

The cost of living crisis is an inescapable reality for people. It is causing huge hardship and stress. This is shaping how people think and feel. People recognise that large numbers of people in the UK cannot make ends meet right now.

The cost of living crisis dominates and is shaping people's thinking

**“ People don't have enough money coming in to cover what has to go out ”**

Focus group participant

The cost of living crisis appears to be laying bare some of the structural reasons for hardship. People are seeing that wages and/or benefits aren't covering the cost of rent, food and the things we need to pay for to live a decent life. There is a sense that this is affecting more and more people.

**“ People are going to really struggle, even those who haven't before ”**

Focus group participant

No-one in our focus groups talked in stigmatising ways about “poor choices” or a “lack of hard work” when thinking about people's circumstances at the moment.

## Current perspectives among members of the public

### **Is this a “moment” or a longer-term trend?**

It's important that we're seeing more awareness of the structural reasons for hardship. This is something campaigners have been striving to communicate effectively for many years.

But there is a risk that this is seen as a one-off. People may think that this is a result of specific current issues, especially around energy prices and the war in Ukraine, rather than a long-term trend born of political choices over time.

### **Who is seen as responsible?**

People look to a wide range of different people and institutions when thinking about who is responsible and who could fix things. This includes landlords, employers and different government agencies. This means there is a fractured sense of who's most responsible — and who should lead on solving this.

People are extremely disillusioned with politics and institutions. There is a lack of belief that the government can and will take responsibility and do what's needed. Several people in our discussions spoke in scathing terms about the current government, then added that they'd voted for them. Most members of our groups appeared to be resigned to a government lacking in compassion and capability.

## Current perspectives among members of the public

### How do people think about the social security system?

The social security system is not top of mind as something that could improve people's situations. It was only when we brought it up and asked specific questions about it that people began to think about its role and potential.

Younger people in our discussions were less familiar with the term "social security" and the principles upon which it was based. Older members of the groups were more familiar with the term.

People see the social security system through the lens of individual, personal experiences, usually of frustration at the hands of a rigid and unfeeling approach. This is based on their own experience or those of friends or family members. They tend not to see the system as a whole and struggle to reflect on the potential for it to be different.

But when we shared some of the Commission's proposals, many agreed with them — and some even wanted to see more ambition. When people support a stronger welfare system they seem to think this is an unusual or abnormal thing to think. People assume other people don't want a stronger social security system:

***“I know a lot of people don't agree with this but I do”***

Focus group participant

***“Help needs to be for a range of people, not just a specific group”***

Focus group participant



## What works when talking about the social security system?

### **Centre the system, and talk about how it's for everyone, especially those who need it most**

When promoted, people have pride in the concept of our social security system, but we need to activate this sentiment and we need to keep reinforcing it.

Repeat the phrase 'for everyone, especially those who need it most' a lot. This explanation makes it clear that the system is for and about everyone, not "other" people — and it navigates the fears people have about being left out or overlooked. It also helps people see that the system also needs to work in targeted and specific ways to support those who need it most.

### **Be clear that it's normal to support a strong social security system**

What we think other people think matters — and most people **do** want a stronger system. Talk about that instead of assuming that stigmatising perspectives are normal and widespread — they're not.

## What works when talking about the social security system?

### **Talk about updating the system so it works for today's world**

This helps people see the need for change without assuming that it's politically motivated or extreme and unworkable. It just makes intuitive sense. But avoid using too much IT language as this makes people think about robotic, inhumane systems and painful government IT projects.

### **Remind people that the government has a responsibility**

Deep down people do believe that the government has a responsibility to all people in the UK. But people need to reconnect with this ideal to remember that it's right and possible.

### **Talk about 'the social security system' but explain what you mean and bring it to life**

The term social security is meaningful for some and potentially meaningful for everyone. It is not tarnished with negative connotations in the way that "benefits" is.

### **Big up solutions**

Many people are and can be supportive of the Commission's plans. People need to hear how things could and should be better.

# Messages that work to boost support for a stronger social security system

“People across the UK want an updated social security system so that everyone — especially those who need it most — can thrive.







Social security is our society’s approach to welfare, benefits and state support. The system was designed to support everyone, but as times have changed, the government hasn’t upgraded and updated it to meet modern challenges.

There are a number of ways our government can modernise the social security system so it responds to our society’s needs. For example, we can...

Our government has a responsibility to make changes like these to support us all to get by.”

## Shorter version

More and more people are calling for the government to upgrade the social security system so that everyone — especially those who most need it — can thrive in today’s world.

-  = normalise support
-  = centre the system
-  = universal and targeted
-  = update
-  = government responsibility
-  = big up your solutions

## Research method appendix — what we did

- We looked at the Commission’s analysis and recommendations.

---

- We used this as the basis of all that followed.

---

- We reviewed relevant communications insights from the last few years (full list below)

---

- We developed messages to explore

---

- We ran two online focus groups featuring:
  - > **Open discussion around these issues**
  - > **An exploration to how people reacted to different frames and messages (each focus group received just one frame to discuss)**
  - > **Here are abridged versions of the messages we tested in the focus groups:**

### **Universal and targeted support**

We all rely on our public services, from the NHS and education to child benefit. These services, especially the social security system, support us all to get by, even if we fall on hard times. Without this support, lots of us, especially those who are unemployed, disabled, or single parents might not have what they need to thrive. It’s important that our social security system is designed to provide for everyone, especially those who need it most. There are a number of ways our social security system could become a stronger public service that supports us all, especially if we’re struggling. For example... Changes like these will give everyone — especially those with the greatest needs — the means necessary to thrive.

### **System needs an upgrade**

When the social security system was designed, it did a lot to support everyone, but as times have changed, the system has not always changed accordingly. Just as our computers need to be upgraded from time to time to help us with modern challenges, so does our social security system. Especially these days, as the cost of living crisis has made it so that people who are working hard still need support, it's even more important to adapt the social security system so it ensures we can all get by and have a decent life. There are a number of ways our social security system could be modernised to be more responsive to our society's current and future needs.

For example...

- 
- We carried out a survey experiment looking at which frames/messages shift people's thinking towards supporting the Commission's proposals. Each participant read one message and all participants answered the same follow-up questions that gauged support for the social security system.
- 

Here are abridged versions of the messages we tested (Note: In the experiment, ellipses were replaced with specific examples from the Commission's proposal):

### **System that needs to be updated**

When the social security system was designed, it did a lot to support everyone, but as times have changed, the government has not made the upgrades necessary to make sure we are equipped to handle modern challenges. Especially these days, as the cost of living is so high that many people who are working hard still need support, it's even more important to adapt the social security system so it addresses our needs today and in the future. There are a number of ways our government

can modernise the social security system to make it more responsive to our society's needs. For example... Changes like these can be implemented fairly easily and will give everyone the means necessary to thrive in today's economy.

### **Universal and targeted support**

We all rely on our public services, from the NHS and education to child benefit. These services, especially the social security system, support us all to get by, even if we fall on hard times. Benefits like those that support people who are out of work or who have disabilities are there for all of us and are vital public services. Without this support, lots of us, especially those who are unemployed, disabled, or single parents might not have what they need to thrive. People who are struggling can be working hard and still need additional support, so it's important that our social security system is designed to provide for everyone, especially those who need it most. There are a number of ways the government can make our social security system a stronger public service that supports us all, especially if we're struggling. For example... Changes like these can be implemented fairly easily and will give everyone — especially those with the greatest needs — the means necessary to thrive.

### **Government responsibility**

Our government is supposed to look after all of us. But right now, the government is not living up to this obligation, as millions of people in our country are struggling to get by. Because of the cost of living, people who are working hard may still need support. There are a number of ways the government can uphold its responsibility to the people by making sure our social security system is there for those who need it. For example... The government has the power to implement changes like these fairly easily. Doing so will give everyone the means necessary to thrive; it is the right thing for our government to do.

## **Pragmatism**

As a society, we believe in being practical and investing in our future. But right now, our social security system lacks common sense, since it generally gives benefits that are so low that people must continually focus on making ends meet. There are a number of ways the government can invest in the long-term health of our society by improving the social security system. For example... Changes like these can be implemented fairly easily and will pay for themselves in the long-term through increased societal well-being.

## **Scaffolding: social security helps people build their lives**

As a society, we believe that everyone should be able to build lives that allow them to thrive. But because of the cost of living right now, people who are working hard may still need support. There are a number of ways the government can bolster the social security system so that it serves as scaffolding around which people can construct decent lives. For example... Changes like these can be implemented fairly easily and will create the structure that ensures that everyone has the means necessary to thrive.

## **The current system restricts people / need to loosen constraints**

We need to make changes to our social security system to loosen financial constraints that restrict many people from thriving. Because of the cost of living, people who are working hard may still be trapped and need support to break free from the confines that keep them from living a decent life. There are a number of ways the government can change the social security system to loosen the constraints that keep many people in our society from doing well. For example... Changes like these can be implemented fairly easily and will give everyone the means necessary to break free from the constraints that keep them from thriving.

### **Paint a picture of how the current system falls short**

Right now, too many individuals and families in our country are struggling to make ends meet. Because of the cost of living, people who are working hard may still need support. This is why we have a social security system, but it is currently falling short for many. People often wait weeks to receive any benefits, and the amounts they receive are low. There are also many exclusions that can disqualify someone from receiving the benefits they need. There are a number of ways the government can make changes to the social security system that address problems like these. For example... Changes like these can be implemented fairly easily and will address many of the current shortcomings so that everyone has the means necessary to thrive.

### **Spotlight an existing program (child credit) to advocate for broader expansion + it's possible + broad support for stronger system**

For many of us, child benefit has become embedded in our way of life. This modest regular payment — which goes to most families — eases the financial burden of raising children in our increasingly expensive society, allowing more children and families to thrive. We can be proud to live in a society where it's normal to provide this kind of support. The popular and effective child benefit is a part of our social security system that our government can further strengthen simply by increasing it from the current level of £21.80 for a first child and £14.45 for subsequent children to £50 per child per week. Beyond child benefit, there is also broad support for strengthening the social security system so that it does a better job of helping people who are out of work or who have disabilities, for example... Overall, many members of the public support changes like these because they can be implemented fairly easily and will give everyone the means necessary to thrive.

**We also had a control message which wasn't framed in a particular way.**



## Full list of materials reviewed:

**Shelter:** Shifting attitudes to welfare: why knowing your audience is key to any campaign strategy

---

**NEON:** Talking social security

---

**NEON:** Living Income

---

**NatCen Social Research:** Coronavirus and public attitudes: Plus ca change?

---

**Cooper & Burchardt, 2021:** How divided is the attitudinal context for policymaking? Changes in public attitudes to the welfare state, inequality and immigration over two decades in Britain

---

**Orton & Sarkar, 2022:** COVID-19 and (mis)understanding public attitudes to social security: Re-setting debate

---

**Tax Justice: Talking tax:** How to win support for taxing wealth

---

**Communicating about poverty:** FrameWorks Institute

---

**Reframing the Economy:** FrameWorks/NEF/NEON

---