

Together for Social Security

How we developed our messaging guide, and why we need it

Background and evidence paper

This paper explains how and why we created “[How to grow support for a decent social security system: The messaging that works](#)” It is a companion to the guide for people who want to delve deeper into the research and explore why it is needed.

Why do we need a new story about social security?

Our social security system should be there for all of us, especially when we need it most.

But the value and importance of a decent social security system has been drowned out by negative ‘welfare’ narratives over many decades.

Researcher Tom O’Grady has written extensively about public attitudes to welfare. He says: “From the late 1990s to the early 2010s, the public heard a constant barrage of criticism of welfare and its users, **and very little praise**. [This was not] a middle-class revolt against working-class benefits users. All groups in society – all classes, income groups, education groups and even the unemployed – changed their views in the same way.”

This barrage of criticism continues to this day. Our social security system is almost always framed as an unaffordable burden. It’s presented as an unpopular, out of control drain on resources. For those seeking to improve the social security system, it’s often framed as deficient and cruel.

How we’d like to shift the conversation about social security

Over the last three years our group of organisations has come together to explore how we can reconnect audiences with our social security system - why it exists, why it's a good thing to have, and how we can strengthen it.

How the social security system is usually framed	The ideas we'd like to advance
It's a burden	It's an asset
It's unpopular	It's valued
It's about stats and numbers	It's about people's lives
It's for 'them'	It's for us all
It's broken	Strengthening it would benefit us all

Over the past three years we've been drawing on a wide range of communications and messaging insights to recommend the following strategies:

- **Communicate the principle and aspiration:** "Our social security system should be there for us all, especially when we need it most."
- **Normalise support:** "People want to see a social security system based on compassion and justice."
- **Position specific policy changes within a wider, positive frame:** "...part of a decent social security system we can all be proud of"

Updating our messaging for our current social and political context

In 2025 we embarked on a new message testing process. This was prompted by the recognition of:

- How disillusioned people in the UK generally are feeling about politics and societal institutions. See More in Common's [Shattered Britain report](#)

- How this disillusionment is especially pronounced in people who are struggling financially - according to [British Social Attitudes](#), 72% of those who are struggling financially 'almost never' trust politicians, compared with 49% of those living comfortably
- A new wave of anti welfare narratives summed up headlines like '[A Benefits Street Budget Paid for By Working People](#)'

What research did we do to explore effective messaging?

Starting in summer 2025, we embarked on a messaging research process:

- Two focus groups to explore current views
- Three rounds of a message testing survey, reaching more than 7,000 participants in total. This allowed us to compare how different messages influenced people.
- A collaborative process involving our member organisations.
- A concluding focus group with people currently experiencing hardship.

What we learnt from the focus groups

Our key insight from our focus groups was that:

In a fractured context, people are blaming each other as well as the system. It's easier to think about the actions of individuals than to see the ways the system could change.

This is because:

- People know it's hard to get on, or even get by, right now. Many are extremely disillusioned.
- People know the system isn't set up for us all to thrive. But they don't think the system can or will change.
- There's a tendency to blame people for not trying harder to overcome this tough context.

We saw a strong and clear tendency to see the system but blame the individual

This was summed up by these reflections from participants:

“People just can’t seem to improve their lives. You’re kind of stuck. It always seemed to me that the UK was very good at. If you worked hard and made the effort and you could progress in life, you know, you’re starting low down but with application, education, effort, you could better yourself. And that just doesn’t seem to be the case anymore. No matter how hard you work, no matter how hard you try, everything is just that little bit out of reach.... I know people who choose to be on benefits. I have a nephew who does that. I have another nephew who works like a lunatic because he wants to get on. He wants to do things. Another nephew. He doesn’t like work. He doesn’t want to work. He quite likes being at home and he is on benefits and he’s perfectly happy that way.”

“It’s at the highest it’s been for a long time. The statistics that I saw recently showing one in six children were currently living below the poverty line, which I think is a calculation defined on when you take all your essential costs off your income, whatever income you’ve got left over, if it’s under a certain amount, then that’s defined as poverty. Of course with rising prices, particularly increasing housing costs and energy costs, then that’s taking a bigger lump off the top of the income that’s going into a house.... I had 20 odd years in the charity sector... I understand the charity world very well and I have a lot of friends who work in homeless charities and food bank type charities and the tales that I hear from them of people using food banks who have absolutely no need to use the food bank because their disposable income is such that they could buy their own food but they choose to go and get 3 tons of beans or boxes of cornflakes, whatever to save themselves money. And I think that should be ended.”

“I have to definitely agree with the level of poverty having increased, especially in the last five to six years, after Covid and lockdown happened, I think that just accelerated it and just made it much more prominent. And I’ve seen it firsthand in terms of... food banks and things like that and how it’s become sort of out there and so widely spread right out. There’s so much demand they can’t keep up with. With that demand right now. And they ask for donations, but there’s nothing there or available....I think it’s the government’s sort of civil duty to actually do it [tackle

poverty]. But at the same time I, I personally think that it should be also individuals themselves. You know we need to have a mentality of trying to not be reliant on the easy way out. We need to be pushing forward with trying to better ourselves to break out of this cycle of constantly falling into poverty or into these situations. So it just depends on how well one of the two systems work. If the governments are doing, you know, or trying to do the best they can, right. But the everyday individuals trying to stop it or prevent that from happening or any changes happening, then it falls on them.”

What this meant for our message testing surveys

Going into our message testing surveys, we knew it was vital that our messages **increased the focus on the system**, and **decreased the tendency to blame individuals**.

We also knew we wanted our messages to boost:

- recognition that this is an important issue
- support for a range of policies and for the funding of a decent social security system
- feelings of government responsibility
- the desire to act

Our message testing approach

We used an [‘RCT’ style message testing survey](#). This allows us to measure how much a message shifts key attitudes and policy preferences in comparison to a group who sees no message (the control group).

We ran three rounds of the survey, using the same questions but varying the messages. This allowed us to test a range of messages, and to refine promising messages in later rounds.

The questions we asked - a sample:

Concern and	- How serious a problem, or not, do you think each of the
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priority	following are in the UK? (options included 'poverty and financial hardship' and 'provision of social security benefits') - How much of a priority do you think each of the following should be in the UK? (options included 'poverty and financial hardship' and 'provision of social security benefits') - How concerned would you say you are about each of these issues in the UK? (options included 'poverty and financial hardship' and 'provision of social security benefits')
Government responsibility and feasibility	- How much of a responsibility do you think our governments have to reduce poverty and financial hardship? - In your view, how feasible is it for governments to reduce poverty in the UK? - Which comes closest to your view: "Governments should not have a strong focus on addressing poverty in the UK today" vs "Governments should be doing everything they can to address poverty in the UK today."
Who's responsible	- Thinking about the number of people in the UK living in poverty or experiencing financial hardship. From the list below, what do you think are the three main reasons that people are living in poverty?
Policy support	- Here are some suggestions that have been made to help reduce poverty in the UK. For each one please tell us whether you support or oppose each one. In considering these policies, please keep in mind that putting these policies in place might in some cases involve raising local and national taxes. - Expanding access to affordable, secure, homes, whether rented or owned - Ensuring social security is there for all of us when we need it, with the basic rate set so it covers life's essentials. - Increasing carer benefits, so that people can care alongside work without falling into hardship

	- Ensuring that parents have access to quality flexible childcare - Increasing benefits paid to parents to support their children - Improving pay and conditions for the lowest paid workers - Increasing the rate and length of maternity and paternity leave for families with babies - Abolishing the two child limit on the number of children parents can claim child-related welfare benefits for - Ensuring the Winter Fuel Payment is returned to more pensioners - Introducing crisis support services, practical help and social connection where people live. - To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about how we fund our social security system and public services - We should increase taxes to fund a more adequate social security system and better public services - I would be prepared to contribute more to fund a more adequate social security system and better public services - Higher earners should pay more to fund a more adequate social security system and better public services - Spending on the social security system and public services should not be increased - People should pay higher taxes on wealth that they hold, such as housing, land and shares
Intention to take action	- If you were asked to do so, how likely would you be to do each of the following? - Donate to an organisation working to reduce poverty in the UK - Contact your local Member of Parliament in support of policies that reduce poverty in the UK

	- Donate to a local foodbank - Volunteer with an organisation working to reduce poverty in the UK - Consider how a political party plans to tackle poverty when casting a vote in a local or national election
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Which messages worked?

Over the three rounds of testing, two messages had the largest positive impact on respondents.

Here are those messages in full, with a selection of their effects.

Message	Messaging effects - relative to the control group
Overlooked ‘For many of us in the UK, it feels like our economy simply isn’t working: costs keep rising and there’s just not enough coming in to cover them. Many of us feel overlooked and unseen by those in power. Our politicians should be making things better for people, not overlooking the millions of households that are struggling to get by. Politicians should be responding to what people need. They should be rebuilding trust through their actions. This means dealing with what matters most to people in the UK and making sure more people can get by.	- 16% more likely to select ‘poverty and financial hardship’ as an important issue affecting the UK - 9% more likely to say ‘poverty and financial hardship is a serious issue’ - Less likely to attribute poverty to individual failings - 8% more likely to say “Governments should be doing everything they can to address poverty in the UK today.” - 4% more likely to support increasing benefits paid to parents to support their children - 4% more likely to support ‘abolishing the two child limit on the number of children parents can claim child-related welfare benefits for’ (this policy change

It means improving making sure work pays and our social security system is there for everyone, especially when we need it most. It means recognising that people are struggling, and making decisions that help more people to thrive.”	was yet to happen at the time of testing) - 6% more likely to support ‘introducing crisis support services, practical help and social connection where people live’ - 8% more likely to say “higher earners should pay more to fund a more adequate social security system and better public services” - 7% more likely to say “people should pay higher taxes on wealth that they hold, such as housing, land and shares” - 5% less likely to say “immigration puts pressure on welfare spending” - 10% less likely to say “immigration is one of the top issues facing the UK” - 3% more likely to say they will “Contact your local Member of Parliament in support of policies that reduce poverty in the UK”
Future “The future of our society depends on decisions taken today, especially how we support more people to thrive when so many are struggling. Because in the UK today millions of people cannot get by. Costs keep rising and there’s just not enough coming in to cover them. The future prosperity of our country depends on more people having a	- 15% more likely to select ‘poverty and financial hardship’ as an important issue affecting the UK - 9% more likely to say ‘poverty and financial hardship is a serious issue’ - Less likely to attribute poverty to individual failings - 4% more likely to support increasing benefits paid to parents to support their children - 3% more likely to support ‘abolishing the two child limit on

decent chance. It relies on more children having a good start in life, and being able to reach their potential. The decisions our governments make today matter. They can help make sure work pays and bills are manageable. They can make sure our social security system is there for everyone, especially when we need it most. Getting today's decisions right is an investment in the future of our country. We need the right action now to make sure more people can thrive, now and into the future."	the number of children parents can claim child-related welfare benefits for' (this policy change was yet to happen at the time of testing) - 8% more likely to support 'introducing crisis support services, practical help and social connection where people live' - 11% more likely to say "higher earners should pay more to fund a more adequate social security system and better public services" - 6% more likely to say "we should increase taxes to fund a more adequate social security system and better public services" - 7% more likely to say "I would be prepared to contribute more to fund a more adequate social security system and better public services" - 4% more likely to say they will "Contact your local Member of Parliament in support of policies that reduce poverty in the UK"
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A variation on the overlooked message also performed well and is recommended for those calling for action on wealth inequality. **Overlooked and unequal message:**

Many of us in the UK feel overlooked and unseen by those in power. We're struggling with rising costs and not enough money coming in to cover them. **Too often it seems that our government makes decisions to protect those who are already extremely wealthy, and not those who are struggling to get by.**

Our government should be making decisions that support our society as a whole. Everything they do should help make sure more people can thrive.

Because it doesn't have to be this way. The priority should be making sure work pays, bills are manageable and our social security system is there for all of us, especially when we need it most.

Instead of only protecting those with vast fortunes, our government should be making decisions for our society as a whole.

What didn't work in the message testing?

During the course of the message testing we identified the following:

A stats heavy message can backfire. In one round of our survey a stats heavy message significantly reduced support for policy change. In a subsequent round a shorter stats heavy message was less damaging, but far less effective than our winning messages. The lesson for communicators is that we need to tell a clear story that includes one or two well explained stats, not assume audiences will reach the same conclusions we do.

Looking back risks activating unhelpful perspectives. We tested a message that looked back to the creation of the social security system, including the following lines. "After the second world war the UK chose to rebuild and invest in a better country for everyone, creating our NHS, decent public services and our social security system. This meant pensions, family allowance, support for sickness and unemployment - a support system for all." While this had some positive effects, it appeared to harden attitudes towards immigration.

Simply describing social security in positive terms failed to cut through. We tested several messages that lead with social security and put it centre stage within the message. For instance "Social security is a promise our society makes: that we'll be helped out when we need it - through pensions, child benefit, support for disabled people, and those on low wages. It should be the difference between living with dignity and being in poverty." These messages had some moderately positive effects but did not have the same power and resonance as our winning messages.

Final focus group with people in receipt of social security

Following the completion of the message testing surveys, we wanted to run our final messages by a final group. We recruited eight people in receipt of Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payment, Disability Living Allowance, Council Tax Reduction. They were:

- Extremely disillusioned
- Feeling that things are getting harder - and that they will get worse, not better.
- Struggling with the cost of living, particularly the price of fuel, food and borrowing.
- Experiencing physical and mental health issues, exacerbated by day-to-day challenges and global uncertainty
- Finding the social security system difficult to navigate
- Concerned about others playing the system, including, for some, feeling concerned about immigration

They responded to our messages by talking about the need for concrete action and a positive vision of change. When reflecting on the messages they said:

“They should rebuild like trust, because obviously they need to do that, so that bit stands out for me.”

“It’s true... The average Joe in the street would say this.”

“It’s nice to know that someone’s trying to stick up for the people that are struggling.”

“This is right. Children are our future.”

More information

This paper has walked through the rationale for [new messaging about social security](#) and the evidence that underpins it.

For more information about this work, or to join the Together for Social Security group, please contact Michael.Orton@warwick.ac.uk