



Talking about social security: A guide for parliamentarians

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Why language matters
3. What the public thinks
4. Insights from people with experience of using the social security system
5. Tips for talking about social security
6. Values
7. Countering harmful narratives



Politicians have huge power to shape our social security system – not just in the policy decisions they make, but in the language, they use to describe it.



Introduction

Turn2us is a national charity supporting people facing financial insecurity. We know that many people struggle to access the social security support they are entitled to because of stigma, misinformation, or complex processes.

The people we support tell us that the social security system is exhausting and difficult to navigate. It makes them feel like a burden. At Turn2us we are working with a range of organisations to create a shift, moving towards a compassionate social security system that enables us all to thrive and live with dignity, and that we trust to support us when we need it.

By changing the narrative around social security, we want to see greater recognition of its role as a vital public service that helps people through life's challenges, moving away from harmful stereotypes.

Politicians have huge power to shape our social security system – not just in the policy decisions they make, but in the language, they use to describe it. Political language, narratives, or "grand stories,"¹ are the messages political leaders communicate to the public, shaping opinions and influencing the preferences of the population.

Political narratives about social security ultimately determine how it is designed, understood and valued in society. This guide offers key facts, expert insights and tips on how to change the narrative to help navigate this complex topic while avoiding common pitfalls.

Over the coming months, we will be publishing innovative new research on how the government can remove stigma embedded in our social security system, as well as working with cross-sector partners to establish a more positive narrative around social security. As we finalise our recommended solutions and focus our influencing, we would be keen to discuss our insights and plans with politicians from across the political spectrum. Please do let us know if this would be of interest – we would hugely value your perspective and support.



This guide offers key facts, expert insights and tips on how to change the narrative to help navigate this complex topic while avoiding common pitfalls.

¹Capano, Giliberto & Galanti, Maria & Barbato, Giovanni. (2023). When the political leader is the narrator: the political and policy dimensions of narratives. Policy Sciences. 56. 10.1007/s11077-023-09505-6.

Why language matters

Social security can be talked about as a compassionate force for good, and as a key element of a welfare state that is there for all of us. Yet too often negative narratives about social security can reinforce stigma and damage people's self-esteem, their sense of identity and mental health. This causes a vicious cycle where faith in institutions and services is eroded, and people are less likely to seek help.

Most of us will use the social security system at some point in our lives. The system supports us through periods of low income and helps disabled people access work. It's there when we have children, when we claim our pensions, if we lose our job or become unwell. But the way we speak about it and the policies and processes that are part of the system do not always reflect this. By changing the way we talk about the system, we can promote respect for the people who use it, create a shift from blame to support, foster trust, and emphasise the need for long-term stability. This will make a difference for everyone, from those facing financial shocks - such as losing a job or a loved one, to the many Disabled people who overcome constant barriers and often feel unheard.

We know, from our work in coalition and from talking with people who use our services, that there is an appetite and need for change. A fair and effective social security system is built on inclusive, compassionate language that promotes dignity. Policies and language should be rooted in fairness, offering opportunities to rebuild and thrive, rather than focusing on punitive measures and negative stereotypes. We need to talk about social security as a force for good, and as a key element of a support system that is there for all of us.²

Changing the language we use takes time and effort, but it is essential for engaging and empowering individuals and communities. This will lay the foundations for a system that is respectful, empathic, and sustainable.



A fair and effective social security system is built on inclusive, compassionate language that promotes dignity.

²Patrick, R and Birt, C (2025). It's time to tell a new story about social security. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/its-time-to-tell-a-new-story-about-social-security/>

What the public thinks

We conducted a nationally representative YouGov Survey³ and two focus workshops with people who have lived experience of the social security system, to explore how language and narratives shape the way we all think about social security.



49%

Half of people claiming social security (49%) think the media and politicians should **speak about people claiming more positively.**

40%

of the population think "the way politicians talk about welfare claimants makes **people feel ashamed about claiming benefits.**"

52%

of the population think the way politicians talk about welfare benefit claimants **decreases trust in the social security system**

9 in 10

people (**88%**) believe it is important for the UK to **have a social security system.**

Only
6%

of the population think the way politicians talk about welfare benefit claimants **increases trust in the social security system.**

Only
7%

of the population think politicians' language about welfare benefit claimants **encourages people to work.**

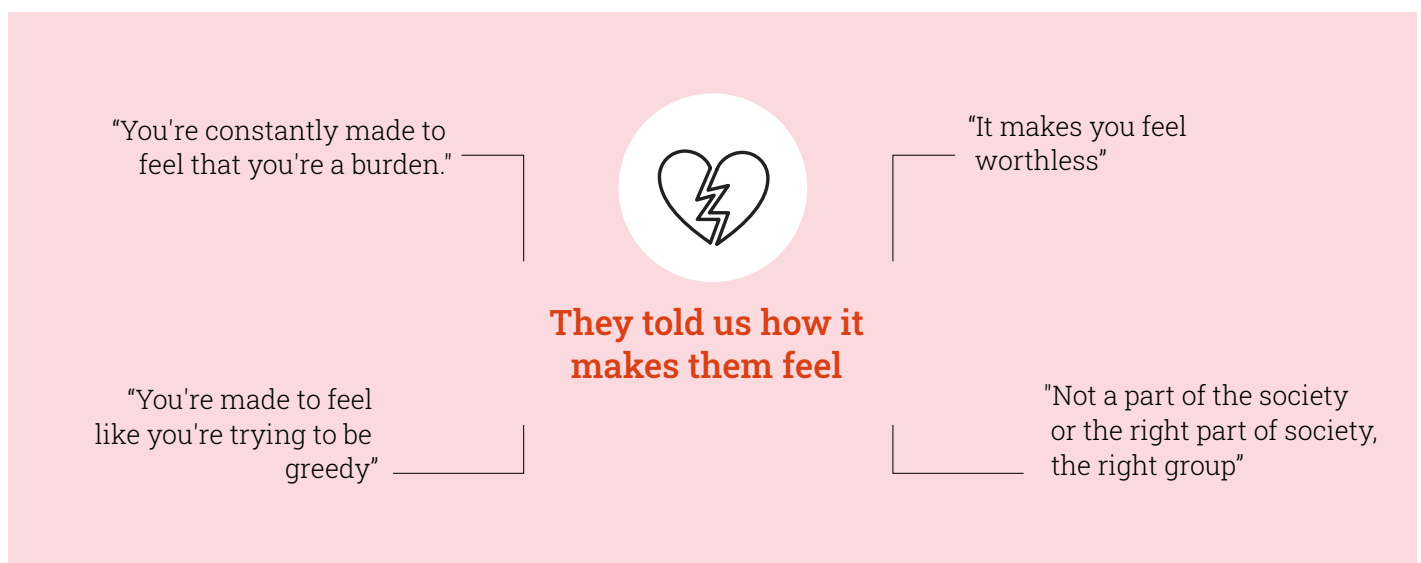
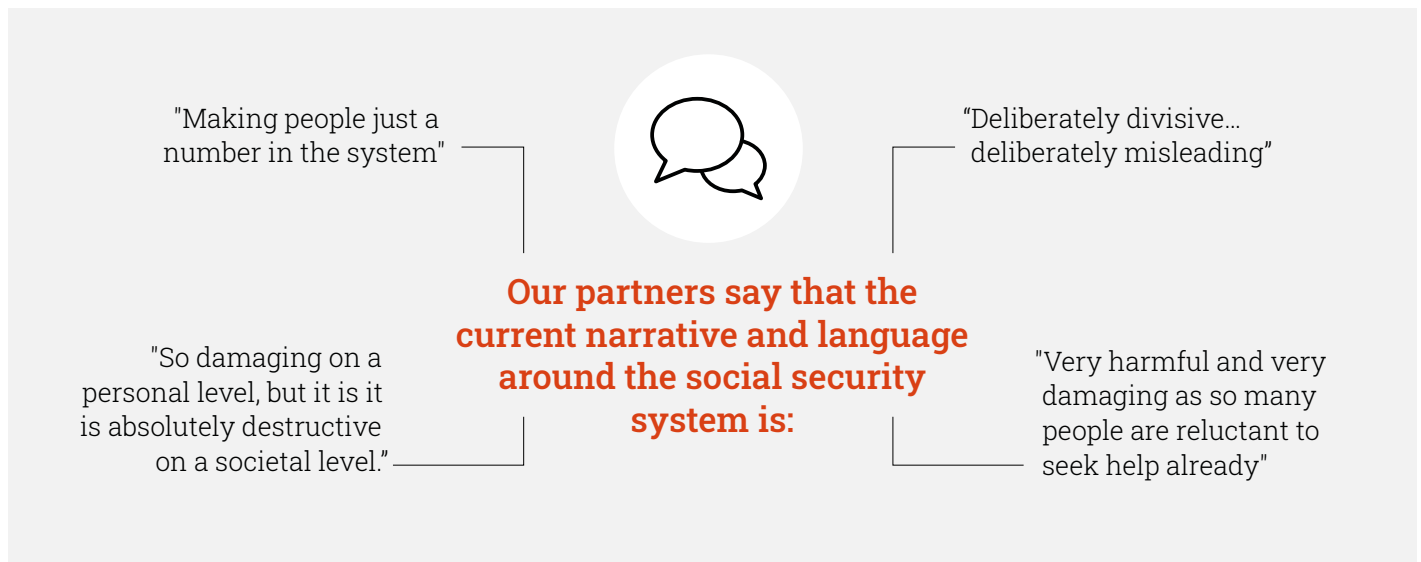
"these messages...are completely damaging on trust"

Turn2us co-production partner

Insights from people with experience of using the social security system

From our survey, we know that 42% of the public believe politicians portray people accessing social security too negatively – but what does that really mean for the people affected?

Our lived experience partners, who played a key role in developing this guide, explained how the current language and narrative around the system makes them feel. For some, there was a reluctance to seek support, a feeling of exclusion and a lack of trust in the system.



"It's very easy to put out things, statements like that, but they're not understanding that is causing people to have mental health disorders and things like that."

Turn2us co-production partner

Tips for talking about social security

We can't change the narrative alone, so we are working with a range of partners and communications specialists who have contributed to these insights. The tips are based on research testing the messages and stories that help the public understand what our social security is for.⁴

We need your help to get this new, positive and accurate story about our social security system out there.

1

Make it clear that the social security system is here for us all.

Social security is a vital public service. Most of us will use it at some point - when we have children, claim a pension, lose a job, or become unwell.

Focusing on relatable experiences, e.g. someone becoming ill and unable to work, is more helpful than presenting facts and figures.

2

When challenging negative framing of welfare, focus on the positive impact.

Avoid using negative perceptions such as 'scrounger' even when trying to portray how some people feel as this can further harden negative views on social security. Engaging with arguments based on who is deserving/undeserving of income support, for example based on the contribution people have made, is unhelpful. Instead, **focus on positive stories of how the social security system can support people to thrive.**

3

Paint a picture of hope, not fear.

Making comparisons with other systems that we are proud of (like the NHS) can be constructive, as can emphasising the system's role and explaining what values it should encompass e.g. **'Our social security system, like our NHS, should be there for us all, especially when we need it most'.**



"By constantly framing an individual's worth to society by whether or not they can work and what work they do is highly damaging for those who can't because you're constantly made to feel that you're a burden." Turn2us co-production partner

⁴We work with people with lived experience of not having enough money to live on to design, deliver and evaluate our work. For this project we worked with 10 people with lived experience of using the social security system.

Values

To understand what values should underpin the social security system, as part of our survey we received responses from 500 social security recipients. Combined with insights from lived experience partners they shared the following.

By incorporating these values and this alternative language, you can help to build public opinion that social security is a vital service that allows people to live with dignity and participate fully in society.

Compassion - a compassionate system makes sure that people are treated with respect and prioritises inclusivity, fairness and wellbeing. Our survey found that **48%** of benefit claimants think that social security should be built on compassion.

"I want them (politicians) to show compassion"

"Claimants need compassion"

Turn2us co-production partner

Dignity - a system that prioritises dignity enables individuals to participate in society, make choices about their lives and be financially secure. Our survey found that **59%** of those receiving disability benefits believe social security should prioritise dignity.

"You just feel like not a part of the society or the right part of society...."

Turn2us co-production partner

Supportive - a supportive system ensures that people receive adequate support, services, and opportunities to live a stable and secure life. **70%** of Disabled claimants feel ashamed to claim benefits due to the way politicians speak about social security.

"Providing empathy and support is important and making sure that people feel fully part of their community with their value being more than just what their financial worth is"

Turn2us co-production partner

Opportunity - a system that provides financial support is only part of the role of the system. It should give people an element of agency and provide space for them to thrive.

"Governments could change it (the system) by providing real opportunities."

Turn2us co-production partner

Empathy - a system that can respond to the real-life challenges individuals face sensitively.

"I want them (politicians) to show empathy by just putting themselves in that situation and seeing what it's like, what and how they would think."

Turn2us co-production partner




Transparency and fairness - a system that is accessible to everyone, clear, and easy to understand. Nearly half of benefit claimants who responded to the survey (**48%**) believe social security should be built on fairness, with transparent decision-making and greater clarity.



Countering harmful narratives

| ✗ Stigmatising phrase | ! How to build a better narrative | ✓ How you could say it |
|------------------------------------|---|---|
| Economically inactive | <p>This official term refers to people not in paid work and not looking for work, including unpaid carers, parents of young children, students and people with severe health conditions.</p> <p>The term does not reflect the significant unpaid contribution this group makes to society and our economy. When used, it is important to explain its meaning to minimise triggering negative stereotypes of people out of work.</p> | <p>"Many people classified as 'economically inactive' are caring full-time for loved ones or are very unwell. However, there are people in this group who would like to find employment but have faced major barriers - such as a lack of flexible jobs. The government needs to invest in more targeted support."</p> |
| Unsustainable benefits bill | <p>Focusing solely on the rising cost of the benefits system can fuel public disapproval and shame for those accessing support.</p> <p>We should avoid portraying this important public service as a negative, and we should instead raise concern with the structural factors leaving people needing support, such as ill health, low pay, rising living costs, and a lack of accessible, secure work.</p> | <p>"We would all want our social security system to be there to support us if we or our family became unwell. However, the government needs to address the rise in long-term physical and mental health conditions which are leaving more people unable to work."</p> |
| Benefit dependency | <p>This reinforces the stigmatising idea that our social security system is something to be ashamed of - rather than something most of us will need at some point in our lives.</p> <p>'Dependency' implies needing support is a failure on behalf of the claimant and ignores the structural issues of ill-health, high-costs, low-pay and lack of flexible jobs.</p> | <p>"We could all face life changing events - like losing a job, becoming unwell, or needing to care for a loved one. The government must make sure our social security system is able to protect us when we need it whilst providing tailored support to find suitable work for all who can."</p> |
| Crackdown on fraud | <p>Fraud accounts for less than 3% of overall claims. This of course needs to be addressed but the repeated focus on "crackdowns" makes it seem like a big problem, fuelling an inaccurate and harmful idea that many people are 'cheating' the system.</p> | <p>"Whilst it is a very small number of cases, the government needs to ensure our social security system – a vital public service that most of us will need at some point in our lives - is protected from fraud."</p> |

Countering harmful narratives (continued)

|  Stigmatising phrase |  How to build a better narrative |  How you could say it |
|---|---|--|
| Tackle worklessness | <p>The harmful perception that there are many people reluctant to work is easily triggered. This leads to shame that leaves people struggling financially feeling isolated and disempowered. This phrase also devalues unpaid carers and stigmatises people who are unable to work.</p> <p>The vast majority of people who can work want to work, so we need to focus commentary on helping them overcome the barriers.</p> | <p>“Our social security system must better support people who can work to find secure and meaningful employment that is suitable for their needs.”</p> |
| Fairness to taxpayers | <p>This phrase can create a false divide between those claiming benefits and those who don’t. But in reality, social security is a shared system we all contribute to and will almost all need at some point in our lives.</p> | <p>“We need a modern social security system that is fit for the future. A system that can provide adequate support when people need it, and genuinely helps people overcome barriers to work in today’s economy.”</p> |



“There is a ripple effect from the language used by MPs”

Common social security misconceptions



| ✗ Misconception | ✓ Reality |
|--|---|
| 'Anyone can claim benefits' | <p>Claiming benefits depends on work history, immigration status and NI contributions</p> <p>Most non-contributory and means-tested benefits require an immigration status that allows access to public funds. Contributory benefits are based on National Insurance payments, so those who have worked and paid in may qualify. In some cases, contributions from other EU states can be combined with UK contributions.</p> |
| 'The two-child limit and the benefit cap are the same thing' | <p>The two-child limit cuts child support - the benefit cap limits total support</p> <p>The two-child limit means families on Universal Credit or Tax Credits don't receive extra financial support for a third or subsequent child, unless exemptions apply (e.g., multiple births, children born before April 2017).</p> <p>The benefit cap sets a <u>limit</u> on the total benefits a household can receive, including Universal Credit, Tax Credits, and Child Benefit. It varies depending on location and household type, with some exemptions and a nine-month grace period for certain claimants.</p> |
| 'Applying for PIP is easy' | <p>Applying for PIP is a lengthy and complex process</p> <p>The form is over 50 pages long, and it can take up to 20 weeks to receive a decision - sometimes longer. Around 14% of applicants drop out, and 7 in 10 appeals are successful, indicating the initial decisions are frequently wrong. Many need support to complete the process.⁶</p> |
| 'Benefits fraud is widespread' | <p>Fraud is low, particularly for PIP</p> <p>In 2023-24, fraud accounted for just 2.8% of total UK benefits spending. For disability benefits like Personal Independence Payment (PIP), the reported fraud rate was 0%.</p> |
| 'Benefits pay too much' | <p>Millions are going without essentials</p> <p>Around five in six low-income households receiving Universal Credit are going without essentials such as food or heating.⁷ Decades of erosion mean the basic rate is at one of its lowest levels relative to average earnings.</p> |
| 'Too many people claim benefits' | <p>Billions remain unclaimed each year</p> <p>Far from too many people claiming, billions of pounds in benefits is estimated to go unclaimed each year. Many eligible households miss out due to complex application processes, lack of awareness, and stigma. Rather than an excess of claims, the real issue is that too many people aren't getting the support they're entitled to.⁸</p> |

⁶7 in 10 PIP appeals won on the same evidence DWP already held | Disability Rights UK

⁷Guarantee our Essentials: reforming Universal Credit to ensure we can all afford the essentials in hard times | Joseph Rowntree Foundation

⁸Missing out 2024: £23 billion of support is unclaimed each year | Policy in Practice

Common social security misconceptions (continued)

|  Misconception |  Reality |
|--|---|
| 'Universal Credit is only claimed by unemployed people' | <p>Nearly 40% of people claiming Universal Credit are in work</p> <p>Many low-paid workers rely on it to top up wages that don't cover essentials. Universal Credit also supports those with caring responsibilities, disabilities, and fluctuating incomes.⁹</p> |
| 'Housing benefit always covers rent' | <p>Local Housing Allowance (LHA) often falls short of actual rental costs</p> <p>LHA rates have been frozen or lag behind rising rents, leaving many struggling to cover the gap. Crisis found that just 2.5% of private rented properties listed in England were affordable for people on housing benefit between April and October 2024.¹⁰</p> |
| 'All benefits are means tested' | <p>Not all benefits are means-tested</p> <p>The UK system includes contributory benefits, based on National Insurance contributions (e.g., New Style Jobseeker's Allowance), and non-means-tested benefits, like Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and Child Benefit (for most claimants). Means-testing applies mainly to benefits like Universal Credit and Housing Benefit, which assess income and savings.</p> |
| 'National Insurance contributions affect benefit entitlement' | <p>National Insurance contributions affect some benefits</p> <p>National Insurance (NI) contributions affect entitlement to contributory benefits like State Pension, New Style JSA, and Contributory ESA. However, many benefits aren't linked to NI contributions—PIP, Child Benefit, and Attendance Allowance are non-contributory, while Universal Credit and Housing Benefit are means-tested.</p> |
| 'Employment Support Allowance and Personal Independence Payment are the same thing' | <p>Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and Personal Independence Payment (PIP) are different benefits</p> <p>ESA supports people who cannot work due to illness or disability, based on either National Insurance contributions (New Style ESA) or low income (income-related ESA, now replaced by Universal Credit). PIP, on the other hand, is a non-means-tested disability benefit that helps with extra living costs for those with a long-term illness or disability, regardless of income.</p> |
| 'You can get benefits just with a sick note or fit note from your GP' | <p>A sick note is only the first step</p> <p>Getting a sick note is just the first step towards an assessment to determine whether the DWP will treat you as not being fit for work. Plenty of people have sick notes from their GP saying they can't work, but are being required to spend 35 hours per week looking for and applying for jobs.</p> |



Changing the narrative will lay the foundations for a stigma-free system that is respectful, empathic and sustainable.

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