

Talking about social security:

A guide for parliamentarians



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Politicians have huge power to shape our social security system – not just in the policy decisions they make, but also in the way they talk about it

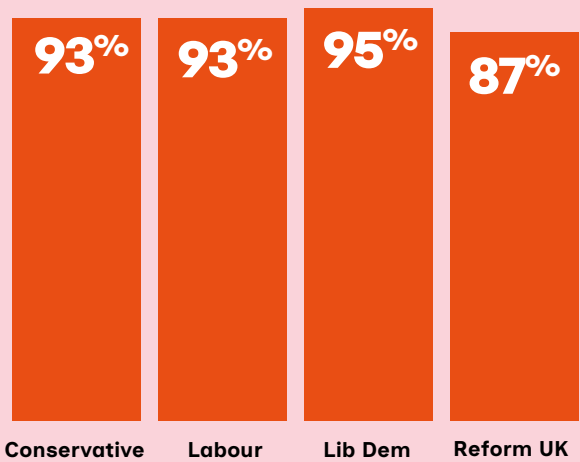
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Introduction

Turn2us is a national charity supporting people facing financial insecurity. We know that our social security system is one of the most effective ways a government can prevent and end financial hardship. It helps us weather economic shocks and ensures bad luck doesn't lead to inescapable poverty. It's an investment that enables all of us to enjoy better health, educational and economic outcomes. It's the bedrock on which our shared prosperity rests.

There is remarkable political consensus around the importance of social security. The vast majority of voters of all ages and backgrounds, and in all parts of the UK, agree that it is important that we have a social security system.

Proportion of UK public who agree it is important that the UK has a social security system



Yet the way politicians talk about social security damages both the system and the people who use it. Stigmatising language and negative framing doesn't just harm people who receive benefits – it erodes public trust and leads to a collective sense of feeling overlooked by those in power.

People want to see politicians making decisions that support society as a whole. That starts with recognising that everything they do should help more people to thrive.

Politicians have huge power to shape our social security system – not just in the political decisions they make, but in the language they use to talk about it. Political language, narratives, or "grand stories" 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. They can also demonstrate how well people in power understand the everyday economic challenges faced by the general public.

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.

We're part of a movement organising a shift towards a compassionate social security system that supports everyone in our society to live with dignity. It's essential that everyone can trust the state will be there to support us when we need it. By changing the narrative around social security, we can retain its role as a vital public service that contributes to a better future for everyone.

We invite you to join us.

Why language matters

Public trust is strengthened when we talk about social security as a compassionate force for good, and as a key element of an effective welfare state we can all depend on. Political use of negative narratives about social security can undermine public support for the system, reinforce stigma and damage people's self-esteem, their sense of identity and their physical or mental health. It can make the public feel that politicians don't understand the economic concerns of ordinary people and hold people back from progressing in work or finding a job. This causes a vicious cycle where faith in institutions and services is eroded, people are less likely to seek help, and financial insecurity is worsened.

Over 23 million people currently receive regular financial support from the DWP¹. None of us are immune to bad luck, and almost all of us will use the social security system at some point in our lives. The system supports us through periods of low income and the life events that cause financial shocks. 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 the system and the policies and processes that shape people's experiences of it don't always reflect this. **Our research shows that only 6% of the public think the way politicians speak about welfare benefit claimants increases trust in the social security system².** Negative stereotypes about people who use social security can deter people from seeking support when they need it, leaving millions in deeper financial insecurity.

The public believe the government should focus on tackling the drivers of people's need to claim benefits, including health, housing and employment, rather than restricting benefit eligibility or cutting the headline support people are entitled to.³

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

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By changing the way we talk about the system, we can promote respect for the people who use it. When we create a shift from blame to support, we can foster trust and shore up people's faith in public services. This will make a difference for everyone, from those facing financial shocks – such as losing a job or a loved one, to the disabled people who rely on the social security system to live with independence and dignity.

The stories of people affected by negative discourse around social security clearly show that there's a need for change. A fair and effective social security system is built on inclusive, compassionate language that promotes dignity. Policies, language and framing 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 welfare state that is there for all of us⁴.

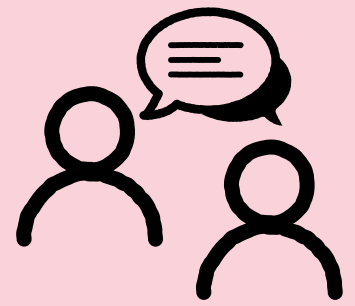
Changing the language and framing we use can take time and effort, but it is essential for engaging and empowering individuals and communities.

This will lay the foundations for a system that is approachable, respectful, and sustainable.



¹DWP Annual report and accounts 2024-25 ²Turn2us Supporting better conversations about social security 2025 ³Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2026, Tackle economic failures at root to ease pressure on Universal Credit ⁴Patrick, R and Birt, C (2025). It's time to tell a new story about social security.

Tips for talking about social security



Narrative change takes many actors, so we've worked with a range of partners and communications specialists to develop these insights. The tips are based on research which tested the messages and stories that help the public understand what our social security is for.

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**, such as retirement or someone becoming ill and unable to work, is more helpful than presenting facts and figures.

2. When challenging negative framing of social security, focus on the positive impact.

Myth-busting can do more harm than good. Avoid using negative language and name calling even when trying to portray how it makes some people feel, as this can further harden negative views on social security. It can be unhelpful to engage with arguments based on who is deserving or undeserving of support, for example based on the perceived contribution people have made. Instead, **focus on positive stories of how the social security system can support people to move forward with their lives.**

3. Paint a picture of hope, not fear.

It can be constructive to make comparisons with other systems that we are proud of (like the NHS), 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'. Research shows that the public respond particularly well to framing that emphasises **social security as an investment in a better future for all of us.**

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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

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Footnote: We 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



We carried out a large YouGov survey of social security recipients to understand what values people want to see underpinning the social security system⁵. Combined with contributions from our lived experience partners, they shared the following insights.

By using alternative language that incorporates these values, 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.

“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 the majority 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 in a sensitive way.

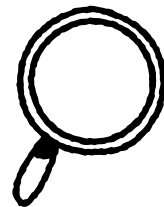
“I want them (politicians) to show empathy by just putting themselves in that situation and seeing what it's like, what and how they would think.”

Turn2us co-production partner

Transparency and fairness - a system that is accessible to everyone, clear, and easy to understand. People said social security should be built on fairness, with transparent decision-making and greater clarity.

⁵Turn2us/Bristol University (2025) Stigma in the System: Experiences of the UK social security system

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.



“Making people just a number in the system”



“Deliberately divisive...deliberately misleading”

“So damaging on a personal level, but it is absolutely destructive on a societal level.”

Our partners say that the current narrative and language around the social security system is:

“Very harmful and very damaging as so many people are reluctant to seek help already”

“You're constantly made to feel that you're a burden.”



“It makes you feel worthless”

“You're made to feel like you're trying to be greedy”

They told us how it makes them feel

“Not a part of the society or the right part of society, the right group”

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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

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Countering harmful narratives

There are several phrases that can have a harmful impact on the narrative surrounding the social security system and on the people who need to use it. These phrases often hold place the blame on individuals rather than acknowledging the systems and patterns that lead to the problem. Storytelling at this level should represent the many, not the few and avoid drawing on peoples fears over the facts.



Stigmatising phrase

Economically inactive



How to build a better narrative

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.

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.



How you could say it

“Many people classified as ‘economically inactive’ are caring full-time for loved ones or are very unwell.

Often, those who want to find employment face major barriers - such as inaccessible workplaces or a lack of flexible jobs.”



Stigmatising phrase

Unsustainable benefits bill



How to build a better narrative

Presenting rises in spending without adjusting for inflation or ‘real terms’ costs can give a misleading impression of how much the state spends on social protection.

Focusing solely on the rising cost of the social security system can fuel public disapproval and shame for those accessing support. Instead, we should talk about it as an investment in the future and name the structural factors leaving increasing numbers of people in need of support, such as ill health, low pay, rising living costs, and a lack of accessible, secure work.



How you could say it

“UK spending on working-age social security is not predicted to increase as a proportion of GDP in the coming years and is predicted to be at the same level in 2030-31.”

“We would all want our social security system to be there to support us if we or our family became unwell.

We must address the causes behind the rise in long-term physical and mental health conditions which are leaving more people unable to work.”



Stigmatising phrase

Benefit dependency



How to build a better narrative

This reinforces the stigmatising idea that being able to rely on our social security system is something to be ashamed of – rather than something most of us will need at some point in our lives. We all depend on the state to provide the systems and services that underpin a good society – from energy and transport infrastructure to the NHS. Social security should be no different.

‘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.



How you could say it

“We could all face life changing events - like losing a job, becoming unwell, or needing to care for a loved one.”

“We must make sure our social security system is able to protect us when we need it whilst providing tailored support for everyone who is able to work.”



Stigmatising phrase

Crackdown on fraud



How to build a better narrative

Fraud accounts for less than 3% of overall benefit payments in the UK. The repeated focus on “crackdowns” over-emphasises the scale of the problem concerning most individuals, fuelling an inaccurate and harmful idea that many people are ‘cheating’ the system.



How you could say it

“The government should 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 and error”



Stigmatising phrase

Tackle worklessness



How to build a better narrative

It is easy to trigger the harmful perception that there are many social security recipients who are reluctant to work. In truth, many people are experiencing life events that leave them unable to work, often temporarily. The language around ‘worklessness’ can trigger shame that leaves people struggling financially, feeling isolated and disempowered. This phrase also devalues unpaid carers and stigmatises people who are unable to work.



How you could say it

“Our social security system must better support people who can work to find secure and meaningful employment that is suitable for their needs”



Stigmatising phrase

Fairness to taxpayers



How to build a better narrative

This phrase creates a false divide between those currently claiming benefits and those who don’t. In truth, we are all taxpayers – every time we buy goods and services in our economy, some of the money we spend returns to the government. Social security is a shared system we all contribute to and will all need at some point in our lives.



How you could say it

“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 that genuinely helps people overcome the barriers to work in today’s economy”

Common social security misconceptions



Misconception



Reality

Anyone can claim benefits



Claiming benefits depends on work history, immigration status and National Insurance (NI) contributions.

Most non-contributory and means-tested benefits require an immigration status that allows access to public funds. Contributory benefits are based on NI payments (e.g. the State Pension or New Style Jobseeker's Allowance), so those who have worked and paid in may qualify. In some cases, contributions from other EU states can be combined with UK contributions.

Millions of people living in the UK are subject to 'no recourse to public funds', meaning they are unable to access most forms of state support, even when they face a crisis.

To receive some support, for example Personal Independence Payment, people are subject to rigid and time-consuming assessments, that determine their entitlement.

The benefit cap has been abolished

Although the 'two-child limit' on benefits has been scrapped, many families are still subject to an overall benefit cap.

The benefit cap restricts the amount of support a working-age household can receive from the social security system, including Universal Credit and Child Benefit. Those most likely to be capped are lone parents, larger families and families with young children. The benefit cap can vary depending on household type and location in the UK, with some exemptions and a nine-month grace period for certain claimants.

Applying for PIP is easy

Applying for PIP is a lengthy and complex process.

The form is over 50 pages long and it can take up to 20 weeks to receive a decision – in some cases this has taken over a year. Around 14% of applicants drop out, and 7 in ten appeals are successful, indicating the initial decisions are frequently wrong. Many people need support to complete the process⁶.

Benefits fraud is widespread

Fraud is low, and many overpayments are due to official error.

In 2024-25, fraud accounted for just 2.2% of total UK benefits spending. The fraud rate for PIP is 0.0%⁷.

Benefits pay too much

Millions are going without essentials.

Around 5 in 6 low-income households receiving Universal Credit are going without essentials such as food or heating⁸.

⁶ 7 in ten PIP appeals won on the same evidence DWP already help – Disability Rights UK ⁷ DWP: Fraud and error in the benefit system, FYE ending 2025

⁸ Joseph Rowntree Foundation: Guarantee our Essentials: reforming Universal Credit to ensure we can all afford the essentials in hard times



Too many people claim benefits



Billions remain unclaimed each year.

Far from too many people claiming, billions of pounds in benefits go unclaimed each year, and many people delay claiming for months even when they're in need. Many eligible families miss out due to complex application processes, lack of awareness and stigma. Rather than an excess of claims, the real issue is too many people aren't getting the support they're entitled to⁹.

Universal Credit is only claimed by unemployed people

Universal Credit is for people who are both in and out of work.

Many low-paid workers also rely on it to top up their incomes, meet their childcare costs, pay their rent and manage the costs of their disability. You can claim Universal Credit whether you are self-employed or working for an employer.

Universal Credit always cover someone's rent

The rate of Local Housing Allowance (LHA) often falls short of actual rental costs.

This means that many people do not get the full cost of their rent covered by Universal Credit and must make up the shortfall from the money intended for food and other essentials. The shortfall grows each year that the LHA fails to be uprated in line with rising private rents – leaving millions of private tenants short each month¹⁰.

National Insurance contributions affect benefit entitlement

National Insurance contributions affect some benefits

National Insurance (NI) contributions can 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.

Employment Support Allowance and Personal Independence Payment are the same thing

Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and Personal Independence Payment (PIP) are different benefits

New Style ESA supports people who cannot work or can only work a limited amount due to illness or disability. Your eligibility is based on National Insurance contributions.

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 or employment status.

You cannot work if you get the LCWRA/Health element of Universal Credit

People are permitted to work, even if they have had a work capability assessment that says they have limited capability for work and work-related activity (LCWRA).

Although many LCWRA recipients are seriously ill and none are expected to prepare for or actively look for extra work, this doesn't mean people with LCWRA cannot work if they wish to and are able to find an accessible job. Working LCWRA recipients are also given a work allowance which enables them to retain some of their Universal Credit before deductions due to earnings start to be made.

You can get benefits with just a sick note or fit note from your GP

A sick note is only the first step

Getting a GP fit note is just the first step towards an assessment to determine whether the DWP will treat you as not being fit for work. Many people have sick notes from their GP saying they can't work, but are still required to spend 35 hours per week looking for and applying for jobs.

⁹Policy in Practice: Missing out 2025: £24 billion of support is unclaimed ¹⁰Resolution Foundation: Housing Outlook Q4 2025

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

**Contact the Turn2us Policy and Influencing team:
publicaffairs@turn2us.org.uk**

