

How to talk about care in the UK A framing toolkit



OXFAM

The toolkit

In this toolkit you will find some helpful recommendations and tools that can be used flexibly by anyone who wants to talk more effectively about the value of all care, paid and unpaid, to the UK general public.

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Why this project?

Across the UK, **many people who provide paid and unpaid care – including the parents and guardians of children, social care and childcare workers, and unpaid carers supporting disabled, ill and elderly people – experience deep financial hardship and poverty and are under great physical and emotional pressure.**

This is because the care that they provide remains largely taken for granted and undervalued. Widespread narratives currently dismiss care as an activity of very little or no social and economic value, something that happens privately in our homes and as low-skilled work.

We need to tell a new story about care in the UK – one that values all care as a vital part of our society and economy, a collective good that must be supported by governments and given adequate investment.

The **recommendations** in this toolkit can help civil society organisations and care advocates to communicate more effectively with the public about the vital importance of *all* care and the urgent need to properly value it, setting the scene for calls to action for policy change.

The **messages** have been developed for **content aimed at the general public**. They should not be seen as a rigid script – instead they can be flexibly adapted to a wide range of influencing and communication products.

How we reached these recommendations

Recommendations in this toolkit are based on research undertaken between June 2022 and January 2023 by Oxfam and The Answer. The project included an Advisory Steering Group composed of the following members: Carers Trust, Carers UK, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Trades Union Congress, Women's Equality Network Wales, and the Women's Budget Group.

The messages were developed through a range of research methods including *semiotic analysis*, a literature review and online focus groups with the public. They were also tested through an experimental survey with a nationally representative UK sample of 3,000 people.

Through the survey we gauged how the messages helped change people's views on care and made them prioritise care versus other policy issues.

A full research report with more details on methods and findings is available [here](#).

The project was part of a research initiative undertaken across the UK, Kenya and Zimbabwe looking at views that different audiences hold on unpaid care, informal work and the economy and what narratives can help shift these towards greater valuing of care and informal work.

Why do we need to reframe current narratives on care?

The research we conducted found that there are some common beliefs about care among the British public that we need to be aware of as we attempt to tell a different story about care:

- People tend to believe that care is an important part of UK society, and recognise that there are serious shortcomings in care provision and funding. **But improving this is not necessarily seen as a serious priority for politicians to tackle** compared to other issues like immigration, housing and the economy.
- People are also likely to view care through the lens of their own personal experiences of caring. Care therefore tends to be perceived as an individual act, when in fact caring is being **part of a collective force**.
- Media messages tend to focus on negative stories of caring and the failures of the care system (e.g. childcare and social care) – **the positive stories of what carers themselves do are often left out and rendered invisible**.

The combined effect of these beliefs is to **limit the degree to which the public values care** because the emphasis tends to be on what's going wrong with care; the **true extent of the benefits carers bring to society and the economy remains under the radar**.

A new narrative

An umbrella narrative to reframe a wide range of care issues

Caring covers a wide range of different activities – from raising children to providing unpaid care and support to disabled, ill or older people; carrying out household work like cooking and cleaning; and working in a care home or childcare setting.

For this reason individuals might see care differently, often depending on their own personal experience.

An **umbrella narrative**, combining a **premise** and an **evidence** statement, can be used to reframe a wide range of care issues by showing how important *all* care is as a collective activity.



Umbrella narrative Part 1: Premise statement - care as a collective activity that holds society together

Premise statement

Every day across the UK, the work of paid and unpaid carers helps hold society together. It's the invisible network of support, empathy and care for the people who need it most that supports our social and economic foundations.



The premise clearly but concisely explains how each individual carer and type of care activity (whether paid or unpaid) contributes to a greater social and economic good.

Umbrella narrative Part 2: Evidence statement - key facts on the extent and nature of care in UK

Evidence statement

In the UK, more than 10 million¹ people provide unpaid care and paid care. That's over one in five people. They help our children to grow and learn, support disabled people's independence, ensure our elderly relatives live fulfilling lives and keep our homes running.

Please see [endnotes](#) for important details on the figure mentioned in the evidence statement ('10 million people').

More analysis is needed to develop a more accurate measure of how many people provide paid and unpaid care across the UK, using the broad definition of this project.

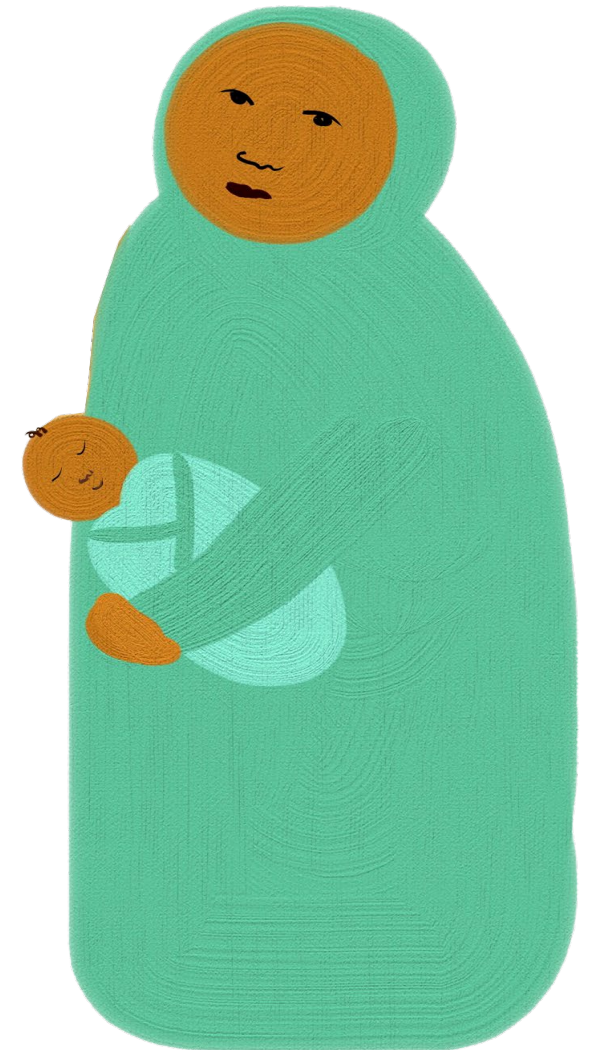


Umbrella narrative Part 2 continued:

It is especially important to bear in mind that:

- (1) Caregiving often remains hidden and is hard to capture through survey data (e.g. people might find it difficult to self-identify as unpaid carers); official UK statistics on 'unpaid care' are also based on a narrower definition than the one used here – this can lead to an underestimation of the number of carers;
- (2) Some people juggle different paid and unpaid caring responsibilities, e.g. parents may also be unpaid carers to people with additional needs and paid care workers might have unpaid caring responsibilities. This can lead to 'double counting' some carers in statistics.

The evidence statement shows the importance of highlighting the extent of *all* care – both in terms of numbers and activities. It provides a flexible framework that can be adapted to new data and analysis that become available.



The umbrella narrative can then be broken down into three impact statements. Each one describes the negative consequences of not providing greater support for and investing more in carers from a different perspective.

Based on our research, we know that all three statements have a proven impact in increasing the salience of care to the public.

Impact statement 1: Provision

How better provision for carers will reduce suffering and save lives

Without greater support and investment for carers there will be serious consequences for society:

The NHS will struggle to cope even more than it already does, causing more people to suffer and further unnecessary deaths. Properly funded social care is key to tackling this escalating problem.

But many carers are already under pressure, undervalued and struggling financially, so without greater investment for both paid and unpaid carers the future and wellbeing of our loved ones is at risk.

Impact statement 2: Economic

How lack of support for carers can drive them into poverty

Without greater support and investment for carers there will be serious economic consequences for carers:

On average, 600 people a day have to leave employment to do unpaid care for their older and disabled relatives due to lack of workplace support.²

Without access to universal childcare, many parents who want to return to work are simply unable to do so or have to take on low-paid jobs so they can care for their children. This can have a serious impact on carers' income and many are pulled into poverty.

Impact statement 3: Receivers of care

How recipients of care will be negatively impacted by lack of support for carers

Without greater support and investment for carers there will be serious consequences for those who need care most in society:

Our experience of old age will be significantly less positive, missing human connection and lacking the physical and emotional nourishment needed to live a fulfilling life.

Disabled people will find it more difficult to live rewarding, independent lives, and those with serious illnesses will struggle to live with the dignity they deserve.

Based on our research, **the new narrative has proven impact in making care a more salient policy issue for the public.** The three impact statements perform equally well.

16% of respondents who were not exposed to the narrative saw care as a top-three priority for politicians. For respondents who were exposed to the narrative, over 38% (on average, across the three impact statements³) saw care as a top-three priority for politicians.

How respondents who **were not** exposed to the new narrative ranked the issues

How respondents who **were** exposed to the new narrative ranked the issues

1. The economy and the cost-of-living crisis	1. The economy and the cost-of-living crisis
2. Health and the issues facing the NHS	2. Health and the issues facing the NHS
3. Immigration and asylum	3. Care for our children, disabled people and the elderly 38%
4. The environment and climate change	4. Immigration and asylum
5. Housing	5. The environment and climate change
6. Tax	6. Housing
7. Care for our children, disabled people and the elderly 16%	7. Tax

Recommendations on messaging

When using the umbrella narrative: the premise

Emphasise that caring is shown as collective activity that ensures that society functions on a day-to-day basis.

Every day, across the UK, the work of paid and unpaid carers helps **hold society together** – it's the **invisible network of support, empathy and care** for the **people who need it most** that **supports our social and economic foundations**.

Set the scene that care is 'always on' and everywhere, and that it includes different types of care, paid and unpaid.

Highlight that the work carers do is the social glue of society, not just the acts of individuals.

The idea of the invisible network of support helps show that caring is a collective activity and greater than the sum of individual carers.

Emphasise that this work benefits those who need it the most in society, to elicit sympathy.

It's essential to state that the work of carers is crucial for society and the economy; this affirms its importance and sets the scene for the impact of not valuing care

When using the umbrella narrative: the evidence

Show how numerous carers are and the range of caring responsibilities that they have.

In the UK, more than **10 million people** provide unpaid care and paid care – that's **over one in five people**.

They help **our children** grow and learn, support **disabled people's** independence, ensure **our elderly relatives** live fulfilling lives, and keep our **homes running**.

Showing just how many people are involved in all forms of caring is clear evidence that it is an ever-present activity, and the big number surprises people – please see **page 9** for important notes on this figure and evidence about care.

Framing abstract figures in ways that people can more easily understand helps humanise the numbers.

Showing the range of different responsibilities that care covers helps to show how important caring is beyond just 'care homes'.

Using belonging language like 'our' or 'we' helps create empathy and relevance for the public.

Where possible, make it relevant to people's everyday experiences so it feels closer to their lives.

How to use the impact statements: provision

Emphasise that caring is shown as collective activity that ensures that society functions on a day-to-day basis.

Without greater support and investment for carers there will be serious consequences for society:

The **NHS will struggle to cope** even more than it already does, causing more people to **suffer and further unnecessary deaths** – **properly funded social care is key to tackling this escalating problem.**

But **many carers are already under pressure, undervalued and struggling financially**, so without greater investment for both paid and unpaid carers **the future and wellbeing of our loved ones is at risk.**

The public are especially responsive to anything that threatens the NHS, as this a powerful symbol of public good in society.

Human suffering causes people to pay attention to the gravity of the situation.

Show that better funding for the care infrastructure (e.g. social and health care, childcare) is key to tackle these problems.

But make it clear that carers are already struggling and therefore need more support and investment.

How to use the impact statements: economic

Emphasise how the lack of support for carers affects carers themselves, with a focus on the economic impact.

Without greater support and investment for carers there will be serious economic consequences for carers:

On average, **600 people a day have to leave employment to do unpaid care** for their older and disabled relatives due to **lack of workplace support**.

Without access to **universal childcare** many **parents who want to return to work are simply unable to do so or have to take on low-paid jobs** so they can care for their children.

This can have a **serious impact on carers' income, and many are pulled into poverty**.

Highlight the big numbers of people who are forced to leave paid employment to care for others.

Highlight the inadequacy of the care infrastructure and lack of support to carers that makes it hard/impossible to juggle paid work and unpaid caring.

Emphasise that parents and unpaid carers want to return to work, but struggle to do so because of poor childcare provision.

Make it clear that one of the consequences of the lack of support is that more people are pushed into poverty or experience poor mental and physical health.

How to use the impact statements: receivers of care

Talk about how the lack of support for care can have negative consequences for the wellbeing of the very people it is supposed to benefit.

Without greater support and investment for carers there will be serious consequences for those who need care most in society:

Our experience of old age will be significantly less positive – missing **human connection** and lacking the **physical and emotional nourishment** needed to live a fulfilling life.

Disabled people will find it more difficult to **live rewarding, independent lives**, and those with serious illnesses will struggle to **live with the dignity they deserve**.

Framing old age in terms of personal experience reminds people that it's something we'll all experience at some point.

When talking about old age, use language that focuses on the importance of the emotional as well as physical benefits of care.

When talking about disabled people, emphasise how care supports their autonomy.

Emphasise how carers help people live with dignity and respect.

Do

- ✓ **Ensure that the collective benefits of care for society come through loud and clear;** we know that care and carers can easily be taken for granted.
- ✓ Lead with the idea that **caring is a collective activity** that **holds society together** and contributes significantly to everyone's wellbeing.
- ✓ **Frame carers as part of an 'invisible network of support, empathy and care'**. This can help convey the collective value of care as well as the concept of 'infrastructure' in a powerful but accessible way.
- ✓ Make it clear that caring is something done by **many people** – that there are carers all around us.
- ✓ Remind audiences about the **scope of caring**; from the youngest to the oldest and everything in between.
- ✓ **Emphasise the emotional benefits** that carers bring – human warmth, independence and dignity – as well as the functional ones.
- ✓ Use **language that encourages people to see messages as directly relevant to them** – e.g. through possessive pronouns about recipients (*our* relatives) or collectives (*our* country).

Don't

- ✗ Begin the **narrative with specific caring activities**. Open with a focus on the collective contribution of caring and then talk about specific forms of care.
- ✗ **Focus exclusively on the challenges paid and unpaid carers face without also highlighting the positive contribution**. People tend to be already aware of issues – but not necessarily of the contribution – and this will be less likely to change minds.
- ✗ **Assume that all forms of care are seen in the same way**, especially with regard to the idea of care as social good. For example, childcare may be considered a family duty rather than a collective responsibility.
- ✗ Use facts alone – they need to be **supported by emotional arguments that make the facts meaningful**.
- ✗ Assume that claims about **carers' contributions to the economy will shift perceptions**; the public tend to view these claims with scepticism.

Some final recommendations

- Show people that all care is a social good that benefits society and therefore for all of us as individuals.
- Show that caring is not marginal to society, but something that millions of people do.
- Explain the wide range of ways, both paid and unpaid, that carers support others.
- Remember, it's important to highlight the negative consequences for society, carers and recipients of care if we don't pressure governments for more investment and support for carers.

These messages increase the salience of care as a policy issue for the public and, across the political spectrum, can drive public action for change.

Notes

- 1 Please note: the evidence statement above was tested quantitatively with the figure of ‘*around 15 million*’, a composite calculation drawing together the following numbers:
 - 13 million unpaid carers for disabled, ill or elderly people estimated in the UK in 2020 ([Carers UK, 2020](#)) – this does *not* include parents/guardians of children who do *not* have additional support needs;
 - 1.62 million of social care workers in England ([Skills for Care, 2022](#)) – this does not include other UK nations;
 - 328,500 Early Years childcare workers in England ([Department for Education, 2021](#)) – this does not include other UK nations.Although this is likely an underestimate (it does not include parents of children without additional needs, or paid care workers in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland), taking into account the risk of ‘double counting’ here we suggest a slightly more conservative figure which includes only the estimated number of unpaid carers supporting disabled, sick and elderly people in 2022 ([Carers UK, 2022](#)) as a starting point.
- 2 Carers UK (2019) Juggling work and unpaid care: A growing issue. <https://www.carersuk.org/media/no2lwyl/juggling-work-and-unpaid-care-report-final-web.pdf>
- 3 Respondents who saw the narratives were divided into three sub-groups. Each sub-group saw the same evidence and premise statements and one of the three impact statements. The percentage of respondents who described care as top-three priority was 36% for those who only saw impact statement 1: provision; 40% for those who saw impact statement 2: economic, and 40% for those who saw impact statement 3: receivers of care.

Any questions?

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