

How can we build support for  
the safety net we need?

Shelter

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## **Summary: How can we build support for the safety net we need?**

We all need to know that there will be a safety net in place if we lose our job, cannot work or can no longer afford a place to call home. Politicians cut welfare for many economic and political reasons. But widespread public unease about the welfare system enables these cuts. We need to address these concerns in order to remove the stigma surrounding benefits and build political support for a system that works.

Doing this isn't easy; in fact, it is possible to stir up a hostile debate by engaging with it. Over the last eighteen months, we have worked with academics, researchers and insight specialists to build a picture of popular views, to find out what underpins them and ways we can get our views heard. This report summarises this research and sets out some of the ways that we can successfully build support for the safety net we need. Our main conclusions are below:

### **Build on broad support for the principle of social security**

There is broad support for the principle of welfare support. We share a view with the public that the government should be providing support, (even if many people have deep seated concerns with how they see it working in practice). Campaigners could build on this.

### **Respond to emotional triggers through stories, rather than rational debate**

Opinions are formed through experience and are not easily influenced by statistics. We need to meet people where their beliefs are rather than respond to an emotional debate with rational reasoning. Believable, detailed storytelling responds to this debate in a more suitable way.

### **Be mindful of self-interest, but don't rely upon it**

Appealing to people's self-interest has its own limits. Research finds that people can be more motivated by moral questions (for example is the system fair?) than their objective economic cost-benefit. Moreover, people can struggle to put themselves into a hypothetical situation where they receive benefits, or different benefits to what they currently receive. An individual's situation does colour their views, however. And it could work to appeal to this in combination with stories that trigger emotional responses.

### **Increase feelings of empathy by sharing and promoting people's experiences**

Understanding another person's situation from their perspective helps to bridge the 'us-and-them' divide. This is hard to do effectively. But if executed well, this can lead to positive results.

### **Emphasise the normal not the extraordinary**

The benefit debate is largely conducted through stories about extraordinary caricatures. Studies find that we readily visualise two broad groups: the first a small 'deserving' group' (for example people too old to work) and the second a much larger 'undeserving' group. Both are seen as distant and distinct from ourselves, are defined in simple terms and are seen as in tension with one another. This means that showing depictions of deserving groups actively reminds people of 'undeserving' recipients. Views soften when people in more mundane circumstances, who are not at the forefront of the public's mind, are highlighted.

### **Ensure there is a vehicle for people's feelings of empathy - a solution to any problems highlighted**

Campaigns should be clear that there is a positive solution to the problems that they highlight. Low trust in government leads to people not immediately linking the way they feel to the need for a welfare benefit system. Campaigns need a strong, tangible call to action to help overcome feelings of powerlessness.

### **Be in the debates where views form**

Views form through social interactions and personal perceptions. This makes them stronger and less easy to counter. Campaigners should use the traditional media to steer the debate, but should also think about how to influence more directly, at a personal level. This could be through social media or through conversations in informal or shared spaces.

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# Introduction

## Where are we now?

We all need to know that there will be a safety net in place if we lose our job, cannot work or can no longer afford a place to call home. In the UK, this safety net mainly constitutes cash benefits. These are being reduced, leaving the safety net less able to weather life's twists and turns.

Politicians cut welfare spending for many economic and political reasons. But there is no doubt that widespread public unease about the welfare system enables these cuts. Concerns give politicians license to cut if they want to, and pressure to do so even if they do not. A hostile benefit debate also stigmatises people in need and blocks opportunities for needed reforms.

At Shelter, we need to address these concerns in order to remove this stigma, and build support for a system that works. But this isn't always easy. Below we share one of our experiences of campaigning on this issue to illustrate how we enter into this area of work.

### **Our campaigning experiences**

We meet people every day who have been let down by the benefits system, and who need a stronger safety net. We thought that sharing one of their stories would help persuade people to join us in calling for a reversal of welfare cuts and a stronger benefit system.

We shared the story of a client with a new-born baby. They were asked to leave by their landlord and ended up homeless, as their benefits did not cover the rent of a new home. Struggling to find anywhere to stay, they slept in their car.

For us, this demonstrated how people in need of support are let down by a system that is not generous enough. The action needed is that cuts need to be opposed. But when we shared this story with people on average incomes in a focus group, they responded very differently.

Firstly, they questioned the clients' actions. Why were they pushed into a situation so bad that they had to put their children at risk? They so clearly needed support, people felt that there must be something else going on that meant they didn't get it - how hard were they trying to find a home they could afford? They found it unbelievable and at best, a whitewashed depiction.

Reassured it was a true story, people acknowledged that the client had been let down. But, their prescription for change took us by surprise.

To ensure they could get support, they felt that the system should be *tightened* further, so that there was enough support for the client. It seemed that making people worry about the benefit system and its inability to catch people in need made them more convinced that it needed tightening. Were we making attitudes worse?

This experience convinced us that we need to really understand concerns, not just respond to them at face value. We set out to understand how to shift attitudes. Our findings are below.

## What do we know, and what do we need to know?

Many surveys have picked up on general feelings about the current benefit system, views on individual policies and responses to particular changes. In particular, five issues are widely reported:

1. Many people feel uneasy about welfare spending. The majority of people (52%) feel benefits are 'too high and discourage work'. This is almost twice as many as feel they are 'too low and cause hardship' (27%)<sup>1</sup>.
2. Welfare attitudes have appeared to harden over the last thirty years. In 1989, 61% of people agreed that we should spend more on welfare benefits. By 2014, this proportion had almost halved, to just 32% of people<sup>1</sup>.
3. Recent proposals to cut the benefit system have found broad support. A survey in 2013 found that 53% of people supported the government's proposals to change the benefit system, compared to 30% who opposed it<sup>1</sup>.
4. Despite the fact that cuts are now biting, attitudes do not appear to be shifting very much. Four years on from the start of a major programme of reducing welfare spending, the people that agree that 'cutting benefits damages lives' are still in a minority (46% of people). There is limited appetite for increasing social security: only 30% of people think the government should spend more on welfare benefits (if taxes would have to increase). As with previous periods of benefit cuts, there has been a small rise in the number of people who would now want to see spending rise. But even this appears to be lower than in previous periods
5. Welfare attitudes are complex. People respond differently to different welfare cuts and reforms<sup>1</sup>. In particular, people feel differently about welfare for different groups. People are more likely to see support go to older people, closely followed by sick and disabled people. They are much less likely to support provision for unemployed people and migrants. Attitudes can appear – at least superficially – contradictory and conflicting: the majority of people believe that people in need do not get the support they should, but also believe that further action needs to be taken to crack down on fraud<sup>1</sup>.

These insights are valuable. But they leave us with inconsistencies and unanswered questions: If most people are worried about benefit spending, why do most people also think we should spend more on benefits for older people? Do people dislike the *idea* of welfare benefits, or just the design of the present system? Does everyone feel this way?

For campaigning purposes especially, we need to know what affects how people think and feel about benefits. If support for greater spending has dropped steeply in the last quarter century, was there a time when a majority of people backed benefit spending? And can we learn from what caused this?

Finally, most studies of attitudes to benefits are quantitative, drawing on evidence from polling. Surveys give us a wealth of comparable insight, but say relatively little about their underlying beliefs and motivations. It is difficult to understand people's interpretations, thought processes and views through their responses to a list of options. Welfare attitudes are multi-dimensional and the benefits debate is conducted in homes, workplaces and in response to stories. It is hard for us to understand views that are less ordered and more emotional if we exclusively rely on polls and surveys.

## What did we do to find out more?

Over the last eighteen months we have been working with academics, researchers and insight specialists to build a fuller picture of opinions and attitudes. By triangulating the latest quantitative analysis with qualitative findings from more naturalistic settings we have built a fuller picture of how people feel about welfare spending and how these views are formed and could be shaped.

This report draws together insights in order to assist campaigners looking to build support for a safety net that is fit for purpose. The research it is based on includes:

- A literature review of studies on welfare attitudes, with a focus on international comparisons research
- Secondary analysis of the European Social Survey and British Social Attitudes survey
- Archival research on the history of attitudes to welfare in the UK
- Focus groups with people on average incomes on their attitudes to welfare benefits and responses to campaign materials.
- In-depth interviews with people on their attitudes to welfare benefits focusing on understanding the emotional drivers to attitudes

In the first half of this report we look at lessons from history to see how we got to this position. We then outline how views are formed and set out attitudes to welfare in detail and what this tells us about the current campaigning environment.

In the second half, we look at how we can engage in this area. We set out what underpins attitudes and what influences people's views. Then what we should take forward.

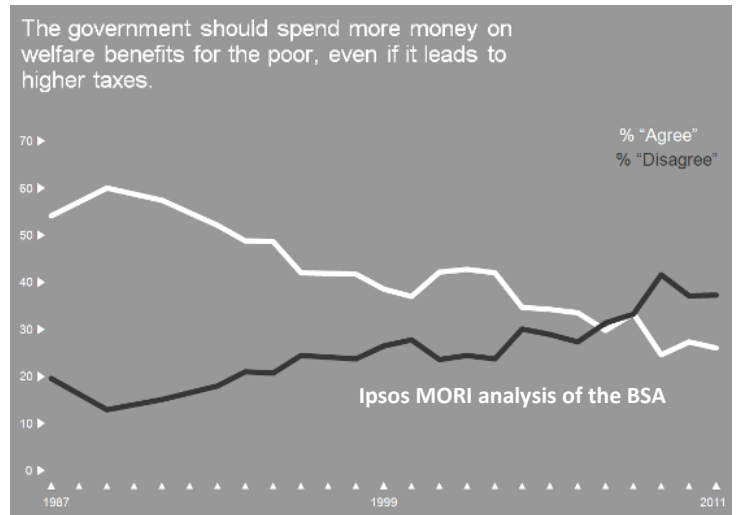
What are attitudes to welfare  
benefits?



## How has the debate on benefits changed over time?

We often think that attitudes have hardened over time. Many campaigners have concluded that we need to bottle the spirit of the forties or design a system to capture what people ‘fell in love with’.

It is not hard to see why. The British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey began in the early eighties. One of the questions asks whether we should spend more on benefits. The continuous data from this tells a seemingly clear story of the evolution of a system seen as worthy of investment by the majority of people into one that polarises opinion at best, and finds limited support for further spending. Coupled with this, it has become an accepted truth that all the social policy reforms introduced in the 1940s (including welfare benefits) were underpinned by a wave of popular support. It is tempting to draw the line back from the eighties to the forties and assume that the intervening decades showed a similar steady decline. This seems particularly striking when other 1940s social reforms appear to have held up well: the NHS is a priority for government spending.



However, research suggests otherwise. Studies from the 1940s to the 1980s suggest that public support for welfare spending has not declined as significantly as we may think. In fact, the starting point of the data (the late eighties – see graph) could be at a time when support for further spending was uncharacteristically high. Growing unemployment and concern about the impact of labour market reforms may have created a context for higher support for benefits. There has been a slow decline since then in the proportion of people thinking we should spend more on support for the poor. But some of this could be in response to welfare spending growing to meet people’s expectations

The downward move could also be a readjustment back to a long term position. The 1940s were maybe not such a high point for benefits. There is in fact limited evidence of enthusiasm for the benefit system in the post war period. Early enthusiasm for the Beveridge reforms reflected enthusiasm for the founding of the National Health Service and pensions, (rather than working age social security). For example the results of a poll in the mid-forties asking people to name the benefits they felt sum up the reforms show the connection between Beveridge and the NHS. The top three answers were free doctor; pension and dentist. And arguably, any early enthusiasm for the *idea* of welfare support hasn’t actually faded. There is still strong support for the principle of a social security system. Researchers throughout this period identified a duality of opinion that we still see to this day. People are able to hold the view that we should have social security – while also feeling that it is not functioning as they would like.

A lot of the present harshness of debate is not a modern phenomenon. There were significant concerns about the moral impact of welfare and calls to cut support from the beginning. Even in the forties there was appetite for changes to some pre-existing support (polling shows that most people felt war widows should be expected to work). In fact, negative views emerge as soon as researchers start to look for them. In the early sixties, research identified strong support for greater targeting of welfare. In the seventies, more than three quarters of people felt that support was making people lazy. This is not surprising - pre-Beveridge protection was also based on notions of ‘deservingness’, and designed to deter people ‘taking advantage’.

### Conclusions for campaigners – no golden age

There is limited evidence that the welfare benefit system was ever very popular with the public. Views on benefit claimants and fears about fraud and inefficiency are not new. We cannot soften negative views by appealing to a golden age of benefit popularity

## What are current attitudes?

We have to understand attitudes before we can address them. Through our analysis, we found differences in views towards the idea of the benefit system in principle, and the operation of the welfare system in practice. We present these views in detail below.

### Views on the benefit system in *principle*

#### Should there be a welfare benefit system?

Most people support the idea of benefits in principle (even if they are opposed to more benefit spending or critical of claimants). The vast majority of people in Britain feel that it is ‘the government’s responsibility to ensure that older people and unemployed people have a good quality of life’. Only one in ten people ‘disagree’ that ‘the welfare state is one of Britain’s proudest achievements’.

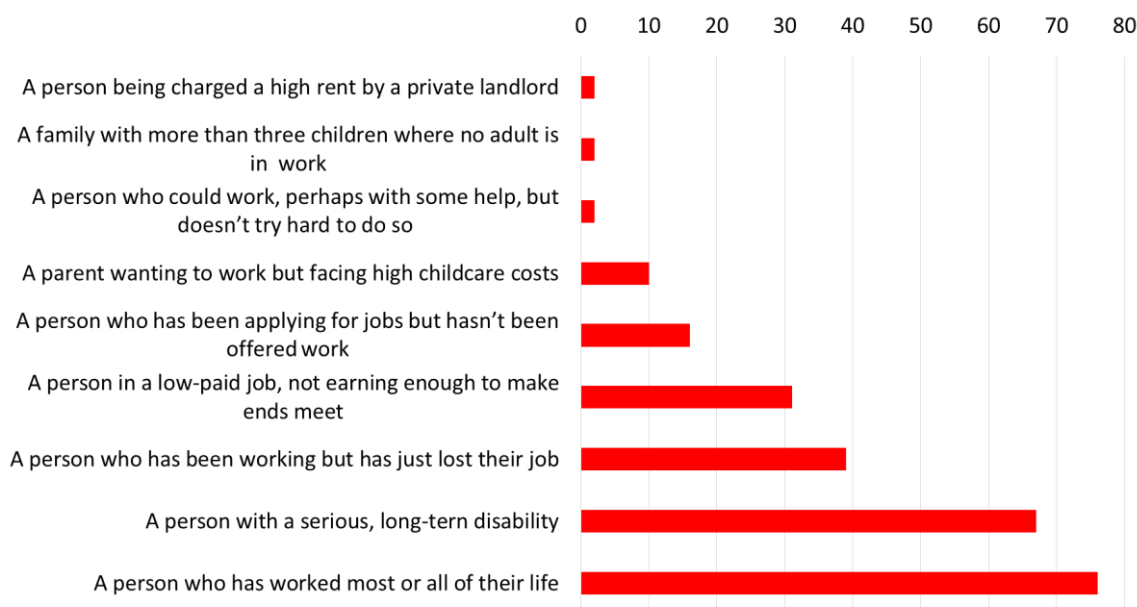
Focus group and interview participants strongly reflected this. People felt that a safety net to prevent destitution was essential in a modern society. Groups on lower incomes especially described it as ‘a comfort’.

#### What should the welfare benefit system do?

But while there is broad support for a safety net, people have limited expectations about what it should be there to do.

Research by IPPR explored views on what people felt the benefit system should do. It set out different scenarios and asked people whether they felt people should get support in that circumstance. They found that people feel that benefits should support people in some circumstances more than others.

Percentage of people agreeing the following should receive support from the government through benefits.



As the chart above shows, the majority of people believe that it should ‘support people with serious, long term disabilities’. However, very low proportions of people thought that benefits should go to some other groups in need. Certain groups being ‘more sympathetic’ could explain some of this (as is widely known, different groups are seen as more deserving of support). But our follow up qualitative research suggested a deeper reason for this.

We found that people have a specific idea of what a welfare benefit system should do. Interviewees felt that it should be there to prevent destitution or tide someone over during a period of unemployment or ill health. However, there was very limited traction for other purposes – for example to reward contributions, be there for everyone ‘because everyone needs support’ or compensate people for the high cost of living. They saw the idea of universal support as wasteful and not meeting this ‘traditional’ view.

This explains why people who cannot work are seen as important beneficiaries. And perhaps explains why people feel that welfare benefits should be narrowly deployed - only 12% of people think that ‘people not trying hard enough to work’ should get help.

We also found limited support for the idea that welfare benefits should help people with problems caused by the high cost of living. As did IPPR – only three percent of people say that benefits should go to helping people in need because their private landlord has set their rent very high, and only five percent believe that they should go to people struggling to cover costs as they are on a low income. When questioned about this, interviewees felt this way as they were resistant to the idea that people would not be able to move, cut down on costs or get a better paid job. They were not immediately open to it as a reason to need support.

*“I’m absolutely in favour of a traditional welfare state system that supports people who need supporting. But I’m absolutely against a system that supports people who don’t need supporting.”*

*Male private renter Nottingham*

So campaigners can take heart in the fact that the vast majority of people in Britain support the principle of a safety net. But campaigners need to remember that some of the things that welfare benefits do can be at odds with *perceptions* about what it is there to do. At Shelter, we know that welfare benefits are increasingly doing other (important) things beyond bridging people between periods of employment or supporting people when they cannot work. In particular, it compensates working people whose wages are too low or housing costs too high. It also supports people when they need to be away from work to care for others. This perception gap could be an important part of understanding why people believe the system isn’t working as it *should* be.

## Views on the benefit system in practice

### How effective is the current system?

People support a benefit system in principle, but they do not feel that the current system meets this model. The majority of people in Europe feel that it is the government’s responsibility to ensure that everyone has a decent standard of living, however also rate current welfare benefit provision in their country as bad, or less than satisfactory. British people also share this view. In fact there is some evidence to suggest we are

*“Everything gets abused by the wrong people. It’s put in to protect the family when the father has lost his job. But someone else comes in and thinks ‘free money’. I understand why the government comes in and cuts things.”*

*Male, Private renter, Southampton*

even more likely to worry about the way that the benefit system works than our European neighbours. The UK has a high proportion of people worried about levels of fraud in the system, and one of the highest proportions in any European country who feel that benefits make people lazy.

This dissatisfaction is shown by multiple research projects. The BSA finds that only 28% of people think the present system is effective at targeting benefits at those who need them. Our research participants saw the current system as ‘broken’ and dysfunctional.

As advice providers, we see dysfunction in the system ourselves. When Shelter says that support is ‘broken’, it is because we know that it leaves people unable to pay their rent or forced into dangerous situations to survive. But the public believe that rather than broken because people who need it don’t get it, it is broken because people who *don’t* need it get it too.

Focus group participants felt that the part of the welfare benefit system that is seen as 'broken' is the bit that controls access to it, meaning it is open to abuse. The public perceive that the government has lost control of the welfare benefit system, meaning it is widely abused. For example, if you were determined to get support, you could.

Our research suggests that this affects the way that the benefit system is seen to operate. Because it is seen as so open and accessible there was limited acceptance that the system itself will 'let down' people in need by withholding support from them. Interviewees were quite unwilling to believe this. The benefit system is seen as 'broken', but this does not mean that people believe it withholds benefits.

*They're given out too easily.*  
 Female, owner  
 Newcastle

### Who gets benefits?

We know that people are more supportive of the benefit system supporting some groups more than others. We explored people's views on who they think actually received support.

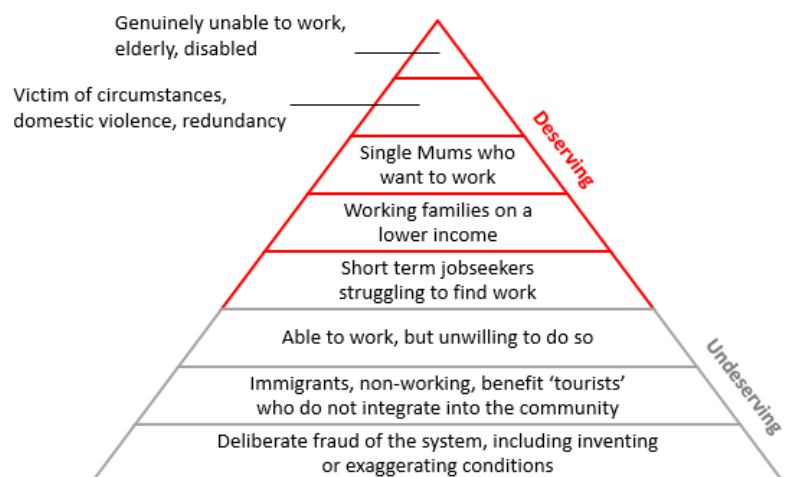
For many people, the idea of a benefit claimant is someone who is 'distinct' and not like them. We asked interviewees to think of and describe a benefit claimant. Top of mind were those with distinct atypical characteristics: 'lots of kids', 'drug addicts', or who behave immorally: 'lazy', 'unwilling to work'. They were not really in need of help and if they were, it was 'their own doing'.

This isn't necessarily a thoughtful, rational view developed due to a lack of alternative information. Research identifies that even people who have themselves claimed benefits can hold and express this view. Our workshops with people on average income households also found that the identity of a 'benefit claimant' is often readily characterised as 'people not like us'. This was true even for people in receipt of benefits, or who have previously received support.

People are aware that some benefit claimants are different to this. Interviewees readily recognised that some people claiming benefits are in 'real need' of support. Examples given were victims of domestic violence, someone 'genuinely unable to work' or someone made redundant. They easily identified these personas.

People spoke about different groups according to a scale of how deserving of support they were (e.g. with people unable to work at one end to people deliberately abusing the system at the other).

Analysis by TNS suggests this ranking is more like a hierarchical 'pyramid' than scale (see across). Interviewees perceived that 'undeserving' claimants –make up the bulk of benefit claimants (the largest part of the pyramid) and that the people in real need of support are a very small number (the top of the pyramid). While 'deserving groups' are present in people's minds, they are seen as a minority of cases – the exception that proves the rule that most people on benefits do not deserve them.



Research found that people readily recalled groups on the extremes. Those at 'the bottom', who are seen as highly undeserving of support, have the highest visibility. However, people are also aware of personal stories of people who are unambiguously 'deserving' (although these people are perceived as a minority). Missing are the people in between these groups in the middle of this pyramid. And while these people are seen as 'legitimate' claimants – they aren't so readily discussed.

## Conclusions for campaigners - the paradox of campaigning to highlight failure

In conclusion: people believe that a safety net should exist in theory. They believe it should exist to tide people over or prevent the worst forms of poverty. However, in practice, they believe that whilst some people who claim benefits really 'deserve' them, they are a small group. They are the exceptions that prove the rule that most people who get benefits are abusing the system. People have very complex views on how the system works and who is drawing from it.

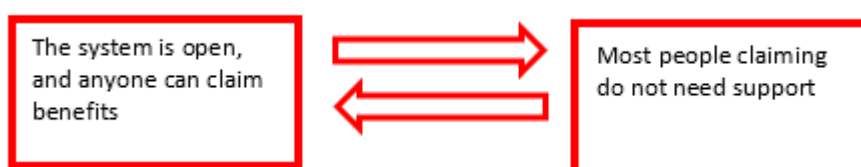
People 'agree' with campaigners that the system is 'broken'. But our understanding of what this means, can be in opposition to what the public think. When Shelter says that support is 'broken' it is because we believe that it leaves people unable to pay their rent or forced into dangerous situations to survive. The public feel that it is broken because too many undeserving people can access it.

Taken together, these perceptions create the context in which campaign messages are interpreted. Given our views can appear similar, but be so different, this raises important questions about how our campaigns are being interpreted.

Let's go back to the case study at the beginning. A family ended up homeless as their benefits did not cover the rent of a new home. For us this demonstrates how people in need of support are let down by a system that is not generous enough. The action needed is that cuts need to be opposed. But when we shared this story it made people more worried about the benefit system and more convinced that it needed tightening.

We hear stories in a wider context where we know that the system is tight and missing out those in need. We also know that millions of households claim benefits from all walks of life and for a range of reasons.

But, as the research shows, our campaign messages are interpreted in a different context. The context is more like the one below: a belief that support is available and accessible; coupled with a belief that most people claiming, could probably do without it.



Attitudes that look contradictory to us<sup>1</sup>, for example demands to crack down on fraud alongside concern that people in need are not getting the support they need, are coherent in this context.

If someone believes the system is accessible, it wouldn't make sense for them to assume, as we might, that the client was let down because support was withheld. Instead, it would be more obvious that it is due to all of the people taking support they don't need. This was the case amongst people we spoke to: they felt that people in need were left without support as those 'least deserving' of support know how to 'play the system' – creaming off the best support. This showed that the system was failing, heightened fears and led to calls for cuts.

Campaigners need to remember that a public campaign will land within a pre-existing range of beliefs. And that these beliefs can be different to those held by people who are knowledgeable about welfare and welfare changes. Public facing campaigns could do more damage than good if carried out without understanding this context. To understand how to respond, we need to see what drives these responses and beliefs. We set this out in the next chapter.

## How do views differ across the population?

Not everyone feels the same about welfare benefits. In fact, views are quite split on whether we should cut welfare or keep it the same. A significant minority of people do think benefit spending should be higher.

Some groups seem to be more or less likely to support a stronger welfare state. For example, women (compared to men) and public sector workers (compared to private sector workers) are more likely to support increasing spending on welfare benefits spending:

However, there is limited variation of views among some groups that you might expect would hold differing views.

Views do differ by age, but not by much. Analysis by Demos found that older people are in general more comfortable and supportive of the idea of the welfare state than younger groups. But the latest British Social Attitudes survey finds that there is no significant difference between the proportion of 18-24 year olds opposing welfare investment and over 65 year olds. People in their mid-twenties to mid-fifties appear to be slightly more opposed to benefit spending but the difference is small between these groups, and older and younger groups.

People who claim benefits are less likely to oppose benefit increases than those who do not. But the difference between the groups is quite slight. Just over a third of people who do not claim benefits oppose welfare increases. This compares to 28% of people who do claim benefits.

Attitudes to welfare also split by party lines. Almost half of conservative voters oppose increasing welfare spending, compared to less than a fifth of Labour supporters. But the British Social Attitudes Survey shows that these views converged since the early noughties.

It is not possible to directly deduce what causes people to feel one way or another on levels of benefit spending through their personal characteristics. In order to explore this, we need to see what drives these responses and beliefs. We set this out in the next section

### **Conclusions for campaigners – some diversity of views but not enough to identify how views emerge**

There is some variation among the population. In fact, views are quite split on whether we should cut welfare or keep it the same. This gives campaigners some natural allies. It should be noted that these allies are not necessarily the groups that we might expect. People that claim benefits do not (in a general sense) think we should spend more on welfare. Older people are more comfortable with the idea of state intervention. But the proportion of older people calling for the strengthening of welfare is not higher than younger groups. In order to understand what causes people to feel warm or cold towards welfare, we must look at views more closely.

# What drives views on benefits?

## What underpins views?

Clearly, we need to do something differently. A lot of time and effort has gone into measuring attitudes. But in order to address them, we need to know what underpins and drives them.

There is a growing body of research looking at what influences attitudes. This includes research on the relationship between attitudes to welfare benefits and factors including economic status, age, political views and the impact of experience. There is also a growing field of cross-national research that examines how the structure of welfare benefits themselves (including levels of spending and rules) stoke and shape political views. Cognitive and behavioural science studies give us insight into the triggers and ways of thinking associated with attitudes to welfare benefits. This gives us a body of evidence to understand what drives attitudes and how we can shift them.

## Interests vs ideas?

A common assumption is that views are influenced by two types of individual factors: interests (whether people feel they would benefit from welfare benefit spending or reform themselves) and ideas (whether they identify with egalitarian values) However, as above, evidence is incomplete and contradictory on both.

### Self-interest

There is some evidence that self-interest does affect attitudes: the British social attitudes survey shows that those on higher incomes, and people not in receipt of benefits are more likely to oppose more welfare spending than are those on lower incomes and those who are receiving benefits. Similar results (that unemployed people are more likely to support benefit spending, whereas people on higher incomes are less) were found in a study across eighteen OECD countries, suggesting a degree of reliability.

‘Apparent self-interest does not play much of a role in influencing attitudes towards welfare spending as a whole’

Analysis of the BSA  
(Clery 2016)

But it appears that self-interest is not the overriding influence. The relationship between whether someone is in receipt of benefits and their view on benefits is not significant. The relationship between attitudes and income is relatively weak. The groups that are more likely to support welfare benefits spending (younger people, women, more highly educated people and employees in the public sector) are not more likely than other groups to require welfare benefit support. Liz Clery’s analysis of the BSA found that it can make a difference when it comes to specific benefits but only plays a limited role overall.

Critically, people often support policies from which they do not personally benefit, or in which they may lose out. Research by Greenberg Quinlan Roslan around the time of the first tranche of recent welfare benefit cuts found that people were more likely to support action to restrict benefits from those they feel do not deserve them, than support action that would be beneficial to themselves.

Other research finds that people also do not automatically oppose reforms as soon as they are actively harmful to them. Research by Ruth Patrick found that people directly affected by welfare benefit reform often expressed negative views about welfare benefit claimants and were broadly supportive of these changes when presented with the government rationale for making them. This is despite the fact that the changes negatively affected them personally. As this one quote from the study shows, moral concerns and a wish to distance themselves from stigma appeared to influence their view more than their own cost-benefit judgment. This seems to have been the case for decades. Research in the seventies found people in receipt of benefits and those not shared very similar negative views about the system, and those that abused it.

‘There are quite a lot of people faking [it], the Government has got to do something really’

Person affected by  
benefit cuts  
(Patrick 2014)



## Ideas

People's position on wider social issues does seem to influence their views on welfare benefits. Many studies have identified a strong relationship between describing yourself as 'left wing' or supporting egalitarian values and support for welfare programmes. The British social attitudes survey finds that people who think that we should reduce overall levels of taxation and spending and who oppose redistribution are significantly more likely to also oppose increasing welfare spending.

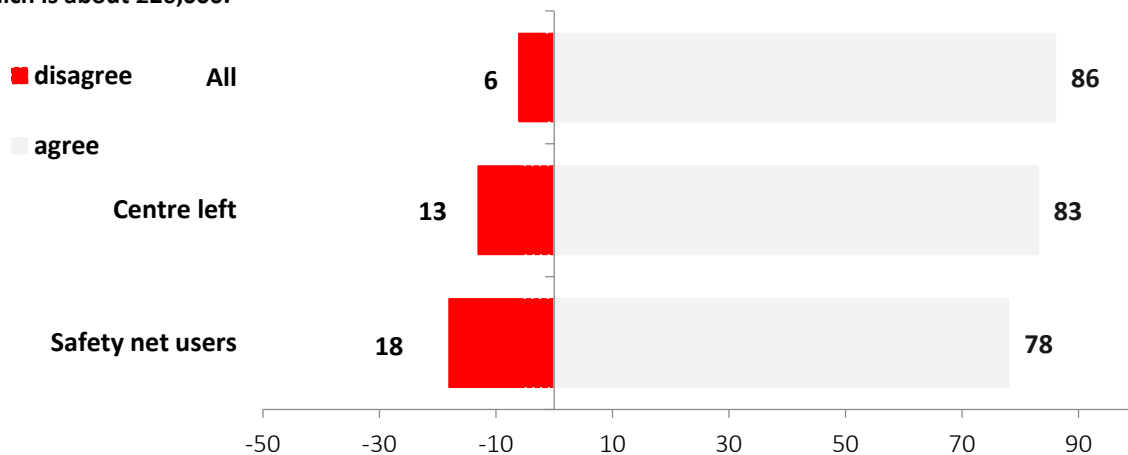
Again, this is supported by cross-national research. Analysis of survey data from large, representative national samples in Australia, Bulgaria, the Netherlands, Finland, and Poland found that those with economic egalitarian values are more supportive of welfare policies than the wider population. This was the case in all five nations and holds true after controlling for the type of support provided in each country, income, education, occupational status, sex, age, and church attendance.

However, this does not explain all differences. For example, there is limited variation in the proportion of people who say they are concerned about inequality between Scandinavian countries and the US. However there are substantial differences between these geographic areas in the proportion of people who feel that it is appropriate for the state to be involved in providing support to people on low incomes.

## How much do these drivers explain views?

It is clear that something else drives responses to support for welfare benefits, beyond economic self-interest or expressed political positioning. Opinions on the latest round of welfare benefit cuts show that it is not merely these two issues. People that identify as 'left wing' and people that claim means tested benefits were more likely to disagree with the introduction of an overall benefit cap than the public at large. But both groups were still overwhelmingly supportive.

**Please indicate if you agree or disagree: No one should receive more in benefits than the average yearly income, which is about £26,000.**



These factors do condition and mediate views. We will revisit how they mediate and shape responses in a later section looking at what influences how people feel. But to understand what underpins and triggers reactions, we need to understand what else drives people's reactions to welfare benefits issues.

## Exploring emotional drivers

It is not surprising that something other than self-interest and ideology also drives responses. These 'mechanical' positions run counter to modern election research - this would caution against assuming you could directly deduce a voter's stance on concrete policy issues from their long or short-term interest, or internalised values..

Research shows that attitudes to welfare benefits are born out of ‘heuristic thinking’. These are emotional reactions, based on mental shortcuts used to understand complex systems in familiar ways. ‘Heuristic thinking’ relies on examples that are more memorable and retrievable – for example ideas that are particularly personal, dramatic or sensational. Over time, these examples become ‘sticky’ and are retained and easily recalled. If simple ideas work, they become even more ‘available’ and immovable.

We all respond to complex information in this way, not just people who know little about a subject. In fact, studies involving thousands of people have found only moderate to weak or near zero correlations between measures of intelligence and greater rational thought. It is how we all process information.

So how does this work for welfare benefits? Views are emotional and based on stories. They are motivated by what is seen as ‘fair’ and moral. Multiple studies identify a strong link between perceptions of the deservingness of recipients and support for welfare state provision or reform. People change their mind depending on how they view the recipients of welfare benefits. For example researchers presented one group of people with a scenario where benefits recipients behaved ‘undeservingly’ and another where they behaved ‘deservingly’. The former were relatively supportive of cuts to welfare benefits. The second were less supportive.

### **Defining emotional triggers to welfare benefits**

‘Fairness’ and ‘deservingness’ seem like loose, subjective terms. In fact, we can isolate and define them quite well. A body of research and meta-analyses shows that they have shared ‘universal’ meanings. In order for welfare benefits to be seen as fair, the people receiving them need to meet a combination of five ‘tests’.

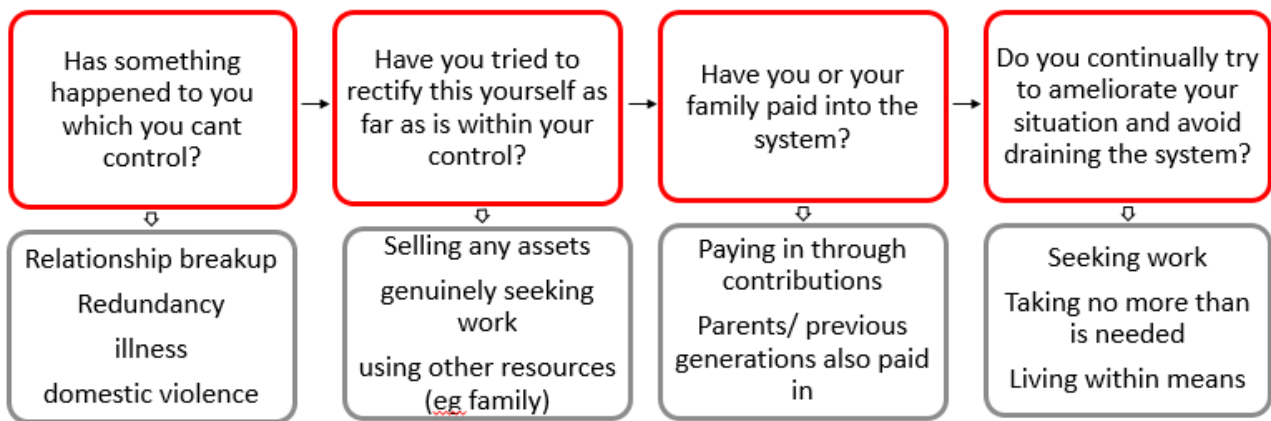
- Need** – do they genuinely need help?
- Control** – is it their fault they are in need?
- Identity** – are they like you, or act as you expect?
- Gratitude** – are they grateful for the help you give them?
- Reciprocity** – have they paid in or made efforts to pay in?

A first condition for support is that welfare benefits beneficiaries are perceived to be in genuine need. An important purpose of welfare states is to provide a minimum income guarantee for the poor. Therefore, a central and simple condition is whether people fit this bill. A second condition for support is that beneficiaries do not bear responsibility for their need for support. A third criterion is the level to which one can recognise something about themselves in recipients. This could be whether someone is in or out of work, it could be people perceived to be culturally different. Honest and grateful behaviour is an important condition for support. This a feeling that support is meant to help people and not be seen as something to take if you don’t need it. This taps into fears about welfare benefits fraud. Finally, the degree to which beneficiaries have previously or will contribute to the system is taken into account.

### **How does this work in practice?**

These ideas influence views directly. We explored this by asking people to define ‘an ideal welfare state’: We found that all five criteria were used to build and explain how a system should operate.

Interviewees felt it was important that people only got support if they were not be able to support themselves any other way (need) and were in need through no fault of their own (control). It is also vital for them to have paid in to a system previously and to be attempting to start paying in as soon as possible (reciprocity) by taking steps that are expected of them (gratitude, identity) to seek work and improve their situation. They should not take more than they need (gratitude). The requirement that parents or previous generations have paid in could also be read as a way of proscribing people that they see as distinct from them from receiving support (identity).



**What do we know about how these triggers affect attitudes in different ways?**

A small range of other, innovative research projects have shown how these triggers interrelate and how different deservingness measures influence attitudes. For example, one research project found that support for welfare support for the elderly is always high, irrespective of whether people felt they had a good or poor standard of living. However, support for the unemployed was contingent on people perceiving that they had a low standard of living. This was because elderly people met the reciprocity and identity requirements, so didn't necessarily need to meet some of the other requirement to be seen as deserving of support.

Similarly, the same study found that people who think that unemployed people 'do not really look for work' were less likely to be in favour of them receiving support. These people were more in favour if they thought that unemployed people had a very poor standard of living, although they were still less supportive than other groups. On the other hand, people who believed that there is less abuse of unemployment benefits were more prepared to offer support even if they are not seen as in 'need'.

Different deservingness triggers influence views of what a 'good' benefit system should look like, and how it should be reformed, in different ways. There are two ways that welfare benefits could be reformed. They could be *cut* (ie individuals receive less money, or fewer individuals receive money). Or it could be made more *conditional* (ie people are expected to do more in order to get support).

Views on welfare benefits *cuts* are predominantly led by how 'needy' recipients are perceived to be (alongside other wider factors). Analysis by Raven into people's beliefs found that perceived neediness explains 40 per cent of attitudes to welfare benefits *cuts*, whereas the other criteria - their responsibility for their neediness, how grateful they appeared etc explains only 11 per cent of the variance in attitudes.

However, support for *conditional* reforms is influenced more by the other moral criteria. One study found that these explain a powerful 51 per cent of the variance in attitudes to conditional reforms. The more the public believes that benefits recipients have control over their neediness, are hard to empathise with and are less likely to reciprocate, the higher the support will be for increasing conditions on their support.

As a result, support for welfare benefits cuts and for conditional reforms is different when targeted

Who?	A pensioner on a comfortable income after working through their life.	An unemployed person who has not made 'enough' effort to find work
Do they need support?	No	Yes
Have they/ are they trying to contribute?	Yes	No
Popular reform	Means testing TV licenses (Cut)	'Jobseeker agreements' (Conditional reform)

at different groups. Initial analysis of this area by Raven suggests that *cuts* can win support if they remove support from people who are deserving, but not obviously needy. Whereas, *conditional* reform can win support by removing benefits from people who are needy if these people have not met other deservingness tests. See above for how this could work in practice.

The importance of identity and the views it triggers is potentially useful for campaigners. People are much more likely to oppose cuts or support welfare benefits spending if they say they can identify with benefit recipients. We also found this. Respondents to our research softened their views on benefits when presented with scenarios that they could empathise with and appreciate that 'things can happen'. This can also bridge divides between a deserving 'us' and an undeserving 'them'.

### **Conclusions for campaigners: an emotional issue that is complex, but possible to decipher**

It can be hard to de-tangle what influences views due to the range of drivers of welfare attitudes (rational, ideological and emotional). But a solid body of research gives us some useful insight. Namely that people do not act solely as self-interested individuals; rather they are guided by a combination of self-interest, moral sentiments and emotional shortcuts<sup>1</sup>. Responses are emotional and based on reflections around what is and isn't 'fair'.

Campaigners should bear this in mind when considering how to engage with the debate. They should also consider that there are many different ways that welfare is evaluated as 'fair'. These can be lost in communications that focus primarily on need<sup>1</sup>. Fairness should be understood as having five component parts.

However, campaigns should be aware that there are limits to what can be achieved by directly appealing to measures of deservingness. Opening up discussion about need and blame cues deservingness heuristics. These issues are instrumental in building people's fears and arousing their suspicions of the benefit system. Even if you can prove that the individual case in question meets this standard, they are viewed in contrast to others who do not. Just as in the 'pyramid' of recipients, views were driven by whether people are deserving or not and people believed that some people met this definition but that most people did not. Extreme examples of need and worth got people thinking about these people in opposition to something else, and in doing so, drew their attention to the 'something else'.

In addition, **our research shows that for claimants to be seen as deserving and for a system to be seen as 'fair' they both have to clear a very high, and possibly unrealistic, bar.** Research suggests that people can be persuaded of the merit of a range of welfare cuts up to a very tightly defined welfare state, with very limited coverage and levels of support. Our research shows that people think that an 'ideal' welfare state would provide a limited amount of support to a limited number of people.

Putting these two together, campaigns that focus on showing deservingness risk exalting a very small number of hypothetical people, while condemning a much larger group in need of help.

Therefore, campaigns should be aware of the emotional nature of the debate, but should tread carefully when deciding the best way to engage. One way that could work to neutralise attitudes is to smooth distinctions between recipients and between recipients and the public. Building empathy (rather than sympathy) can soften attitudes.

## What influences how people respond?

Above we set out what triggers responses. Emotional judgements of fairness are paramount. As we set out above, there appears to be some relationship between self-interest, ideology and attitudes. But these do not seem to be the overriding factors that trigger views.

What research does tell us is that responses are mediated by people's position, perspectives and feelings about other issues too. It is this that may explain why there is relationships between people's self-interest and ideology and their views. People's circumstance affect how they respond to emotional triggers.

As we can see, people's own sense of security, their familiarity with people in need and their belief in whether the government can do anything to help all affect views on welfare. These are explored further below.

### **Feelings of personal security**

As discussed, self-interest has a contested relationship with attitudes to welfare benefits. It doesn't appear to trigger responses in a way that we might expect if people acted as rational individuals. But it does mediate how people respond to emotional triggers and deduce fairness.

Being worried that you will lose your job appears to make people more supportive of spending on benefits. People who are worried about losing their job in the next twelve months are more in favour of government spending on unemployment benefits. However, feeling stretched can lead to people to being more hostile to benefit spending. People who say that they are worried about paying their bills next year are more likely to perceive higher levels of fraud in the system or feel that people on benefits are not making enough effort to improve their situation.

We might expect that someone feeling under pressure and concerned about making ends meet will be more likely to demand satisfactory social security. If people were acting in 'rational self-interest' it may make sense for them to support spending in either scenario. They have an impact, but not the one we might anticipate.

Instead it appears these situations are mediating emotional triggers differently. Someone who can see themselves being unemployed (and possibly claiming benefits) shortly, may be more likely to be able to empathise with someone in this position. However, someone who feels they will be having to struggle, may find it harder to empathise with someone getting support.

### **Proximity to people in need of support**

Knowing someone personally who is in need of benefits can increase support for welfare benefits spending. Support for welfare benefits spending tends to increase when unemployment increases.

Studies show that people who live in an area that sees rising unemployment or people with a family member who is affected by unemployment account for much of this growth. Therefore, views are not just shifted by the wider economic situation per se, it appears they are shifted by knowing people affected locally or personally.

### **Trust in the government's ability to help**

One of the most important factors affecting attitudes to welfare benefits is trust in government. There is strong evidence of a relationship between whether someone feels their government can function adequately (for example, it is not corrupt and can administrate a system) and whether they support spending money on welfare benefits. Cross-national studies have found that people in countries where the population are less worried about government corruption, are more likely to support spending on a state backed safety net.

*"We can scream and shout as much as we like and it won't make a blind bit of difference because the government is full of people who don't know what it's like to struggle.  
Male, Renter, London*

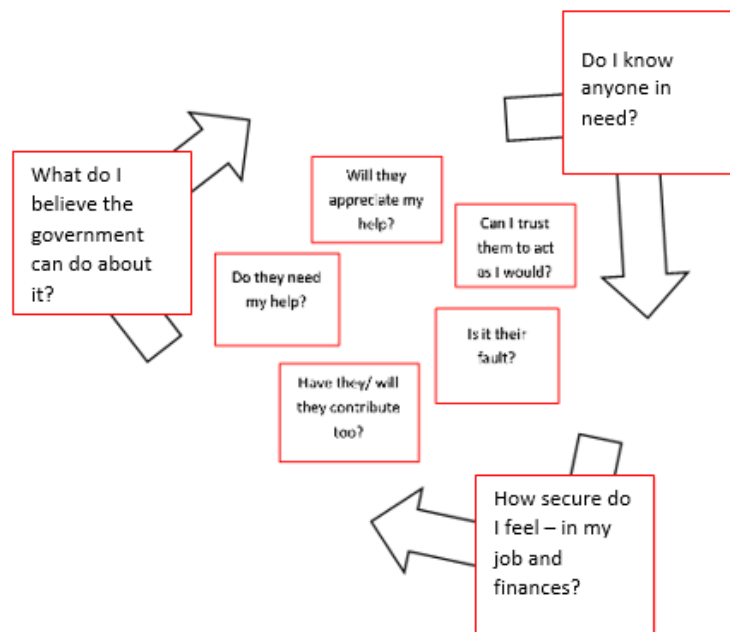
In many ways, this is obvious: in order to entrust a government to deliver a social security system, people have to believe they will be able to administer one fairly and effectively. This relationship holds even when controlling for differences in individuals' expressed values and other demographic and economic factors.

There is evidence that 'trust in government' is an important precursor to other factors influencing attitudes on benefits. Even if someone believes in greater equality (ideas), feels they would benefit from some form of support (interest) or feels like it would be unfair if someone unable to work was left destitute (fairness), they may not feel that the way to achieve this is through a system of social security. They are much more likely to think that the best way of achieving this is through social security (as opposed to for example personal safety nets) if they also believe that their state would be able to do this effectively and efficiently.

We saw the effect of this with focus group participants. We found that showing them particular campaign messages made people feel empathetic towards benefit claimants. However, this did not necessarily translate into feelings that the government should spend more on welfare benefits. A strong barrier to this was that many people did not believe that the government could or would be able to do anything to help.

**Conclusions for campaigners – emotional responses are affected by personal circumstances and beliefs. But not always in a way that might be assumed.**

Some individual and societal factors make people more or less likely to support welfare spending - and more or less likely to translate emotional feelings of empathy or shock into support for a stronger welfare state. Whether they trust the government's ability to deliver services efficiently and fairly influences this, as does their own feeling of security and whether they know people in need.



The diagram above summarises what research tells us about what influences and drives attitudes to welfare. Views are driven by emotional judgements of fairness. These are then mediated by people's own sense of security, familiarity with people in need and their belief in whether the government can do anything about it.

Campaigners need to appeal to, but also avoid intensifying, emotional triggers. In order to ensure that empathy and warm feelings towards the system and towards benefit claimants are sustained and lead to calls for a stronger safety net, they also need to be mindful of people's sentiments on other issues.

How can we best engage with  
the debate?

# How and where are views on welfare benefits formed?

Attitudes to welfare are based on a very loose understanding of the benefit system.

Surveys find that most people know relatively little about what help is available, who gets it and how it is delivered. As above, we conducted interviews with people from a range of backgrounds. Many people researchers spoke to were unsure what housing benefit was: some confused it with council housing, others were unsure about who would receive it.

People are also generally unaware of the detail of recent changes: interviewees had a sense that the government had done something to the system recently, but no one interviewed could name a particular change and only recognised the bedroom tax from a list of prompts.

However, having a low level of knowledge is not a barrier to developing an opinion.

We found that people who could not describe or recognise the current system often held very strong views about it, including that it needed reforming. Even if people acknowledged that they knew very little about the technical operation of the benefit system, they felt that they had an adequate level of knowledge to comment.

Views are not based on, nor supported by statistics but on much more evocative and emotional stories.

We found that views are formed through, and often evidenced by, personal experiences. As the quote to the right shows, people reference 'a friend', 'a neighbour' or 'someone I see' as their source. These views are bolstered through social encounters with others with similar first, second and third hand accounts.

The media is an important source of information. But research suggests that it primarily confirms and amplifies views that had already been formed through personal encounters, rather than sets them. We found that people in interviews tended to draw on depictions of people on benefits from the media in order to demonstrate that their knowledge was true and that their personal and social encounters were part of a much larger issue. However, people are media savvy. People with strong views could identify that the portrayal of benefits in newspapers were not the full picture.

*"I know so many people who are on welfare when I know they can work. I have to work to get what I've got and then I see them getting loads of stuff that I can't afford.... I think they bail out too many people."*  
Female, Owner, Walsall

## Conclusions for campaigners – myths are reality

Views are built out of direct personal experience, using media portrayals and 'facts' to bolster views.

We may feel that the benefit debate is constructed on 'myths'. However, it's important to acknowledge that welfare attitudes can be seen as very accurate by the person that holds them, even when based on limited detailed knowledge. If a view is developed through a personal interaction eg 'meeting someone' or 'seeing' something you feel you have the clearest perspective on it. Only you know whether your views are true or false. The personal nature of views makes it hard to shift them. Any opposing view can be dismissed as coming from someone with less of an understanding. This, alongside the emotional nature of views, is one reason why myth busting is an ineffective approach for campaigners in this area.

We need to acknowledge the role of informal encounters, alongside the media. When competing for a hearing, engaging people in more informal settings could produce better results than the media.



## How can we build support for the safety net we need?

Attitudes to social security are emotional and affected by experiences that are highly personal to the holder. Shifting them is hard.

We need to campaign in a way that is sensitive to where attitudes are now, how campaign messages are received and how views are shaped. The evidence we have provides some insight into what works and what to watch out for. We set out some ideas below.

### Ideas to watch out for

Some approaches may intuitively feel like a way forward. However, insight shows that these may be less effective than they first appear.

**There is no latent passion for social security – there is no golden age to rediscover**

We can build on a feeling that a safety net should exist in principle. However, it is not wise to attempt to capture the spirit of a golden age. People were never passionate about the social security system. Trying to create a feeling of nostalgia or appeal to its founding values may come up short given how ambivalent most of the population have been historically.

**Myth busting ignores the drivers of attitudes and the way they're formed – it does not work**

There is a clear knowledge gap behind attitudes to welfare. But providing this doesn't prevent people engaging in an emotional conversation based on moral sentiments. Views are based on heuristic thinking in which things are simplified. People look for evidence to support their views rather than change them. Opposing rational facts don't answer these concerns

**Highlighting deservingness does not produce a better debate – it entrenches the one we have**

People are already aware that some people who claim benefits meet 'deservingness' criteria so highlighting these groups does not challenge underlying beliefs. In fact, rather than shift attitudes, it can trigger heuristic thinking where it is established that only a small number of people should receive benefits, and many more should not. Highlighting deservingness invites comparisons to other claimants and may feed pre-existing fears about a system broken by fraud and scroungers rather than encourage people to recognise and blame structural inadequacies.

**Pointing out how the current system is broken does not challenge negative attitudes**

Studies of attitudes show that there is a widespread belief that welfare doesn't work, that the government doesn't have a handle on it and that it goes to the wrong people. Pointing out how the right people aren't getting it reinforces these beliefs rather than shifts them.

**Making people fearful that they may need support can make them more resistant to helping others**

Self-interest is a limited and complex driver of attitudes. We know that many people use the safety net at some point in their lives and that trust and solidarity are important drivers of views. However, making people concerned about their own insecurity can in fact reduce their trust in others and their appetite for spending on a social safety net.

## Ideas to consider

Instead, research suggests that we should consider some of the routes below.

### **Build on broad support for the principle of social security**

There is broad support for the principle of welfare support. We share a view with the public that the government should be providing support, even if many people have deep seated concerns with how they see it working in practice. Campaigners could build on this.

### **Respond to emotional triggers through stories, rather than rational debate**

Opinions are formed through experience and are not easily influenced by statistics. We need to meet people where their beliefs are rather than respond to an emotional debate with rational reasoning. Believable, detailed storytelling responds to this debate in a more suitable way.

### **Be mindful of self-interest, but don't rely upon it**

Appealing to self-interest as a motivator has its own limits. People are more motivated by moral questions (for example is the system fair?) than their objective economic cost-benefit. Moreover people can struggle to put themselves into a hypothetical situation where they receive benefits. However, an individual's situation does colour their views. It could work to appeal to this in combination with stories that trigger emotional responses.

### **Increase feelings of empathy by sharing and promoting people's experiences**

Understanding another person's situation from their perspective helps to bridge the 'us-and-them' divide. This is hard to do effectively. But if executed well, this can lead to positive results.

### **Emphasise the normal not the extraordinary**

The benefit debate is largely conducted through stories about extraordinary caricatures. The public readily visualise two broad groups: the first a small 'deserving' group' (for example people too old to work) and the second a much larger 'undeserving' group. Both are seen as distant and distinct from themselves, defined in simple terms and in tension with one another. This means that showing depictions of deserving groups actively reminds people of 'undeserving' recipients. Views soften when people in more mundane circumstances, who are not at the forefront of the public's mind, are highlighted.

### **Ensure there is a vehicle for people's feelings of empathy - a meaningful call to action**

Campaigns should be clear that there is a positive solution to the problems that they highlight. Low trust in government leads to people not immediately linking the way they feel to the need for a welfare benefit system. Campaigns need a strong, tangible call to action to help overcome feelings of powerlessness.

### **Be in the debates where views form**

Views form through social interactions and personal perceptions. This makes them stronger and less easy to counter. Campaigners should use the traditional media to steer the debate, but should also think about how to influence more directly, at a personal level. This could be through social media or through conversations in informal or shared spaces.