

BRIEFING

OCTOBER 2024

Talking effectively about the Minimum Income Guarantee



A roadmap to the Minimum Income Guarantee

- The importance of our collective communications framework to gaining public and political support for the MIG was a recurring theme throughout our engagement seminars.
- Determining a framework to talk about the MIG is likely to be a large, long-term piece of work. This session enabled us to garner useful insight into useful values and images, alongside narratives which were perceived as either helpful or unhelpful. These findings could function as the basis of a narrative framework for the MIG which aims to make the concept digestible and desirable to a wider audience.
- We have found support for the values of security, community and freedom as building blocks of this narrative framework. It may be useful for the Scottish Government to test these values with a wider range of stakeholders.
- The Scottish Government should work to develop framing for the policy, and this should be a priority both in advance of, and following, the publication of the Expert Group report. Civil society must also work together to build a shared narrative to accompany our advocacy on the policy.
- Current levels of public support for the idea of a guarantee to a minimum level of income provide a platform on which to build.
- However, polling shows that the public continue to see fair work as playing the most critical role in ensuring that nobody falls below a reasonable standard of living. This again underscores the centrality of the labour market in anti-poverty policy-making and the importance of getting the work sphere of the MIG correct in order to achieve public support.



Introduction

One of the recurring themes of our engagement with members, evidenced throughout this series of briefings, has been the importance of building a strong narrative framework on the Minimum Income Guarantee (MIG). This narrative framework was viewed as critical to gaining public and political support with attendees across our seminars viewing our communications around the policy as a critical building block towards implementation. Indeed, public awareness of the MIG remains fairly low, in part reflecting the low-levels of civil society and political engagement in the policy. This renders clear, effective communication of particular importance as we enter the period of implementation. The key priorities for our narrative framework, as identified by attendees at the five previous seminars include:

- Highlighting the value that we all gain from a society where everyone has enough for a decent and dignified life;
- Reflecting pre-existing research on the risks and harms of the conditionality that is built into current support;
- Promoting MIG as a practical proposal to realise our human rights;
- Rooted in inclusivity, making it clear that the MIG is for everyone and will tackle poverty in the round. The MIG cannot be about pitting groups against each other, or be singularly focused on child poverty, but a universal guarantee for all people living in Scotland;

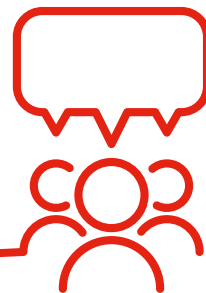
- Utilising evidence about the economic costs of poverty, and the benefits to our shared prosperity of tackling this injustice. This should involve framing the MIG as not only the right thing to do, but also making economic sense;
- Responding to negative perceptions of social security, and potential pushback on the costs of the policy;
- Providing visibility to disabled people's higher risk of poverty, the causes which underpin this, and the actions required to address this;
- Highlighting the benefits of an adequate income in providing a platform for entry into, or progression within, paid work; and
- Focusing on the collective wellbeing of all of our citizens.

To discuss this in more detail, our sixth seminar considered issues around effectively communicating the concept of the MIG to a broad general audience, including exploring existing public attitudes to the idea, and potential framing of the policy. The seminar included inputs from Fiona Hutchison, Head of Research at Diffley Partnership, a strategic research and insights agency, and David Eyre, Communications Officer at the Poverty Alliance.

This seminar built upon the Poverty Alliance's approach to talking about poverty, informed by research from Frameworks and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. When we talk about poverty, framing our communications around the shared values of compassion and justice has been found to help reach people and change their attitudes. This work also uses simple metaphors such as 'boxed in' or 'in the grip of' to convey the idea of how life on low incomes restricts people's freedoms and opportunities. This approach has important lessons for work to build a narrative framework for the MIG.

This seminar, and indeed this briefing, provides some early insight into the values, metaphor and images that are effective when communicating about the MIG. However, we encourage the Scottish Government to build upon this framework and to explore these questions with the broader public and those with lived experience of poverty. Building the narrative framework will remain a core goal of this work as we enter phase two of this project.

Current public attitudes and level of support



Fiona Hutchison, Head of Research at Diffley Partners, presented public opinion polling carried out as part of their regular Understanding Scotland series, and through commissioned work from IPPR Scotland.¹ Healthcare and the NHS, alongside the cost of living, have consistently been seen by the Scottish public as the top issues facing Scotland since Autumn 2021. In the most recent wave, 20% of Scots reported poverty and inequality as one of the top three issues facing Scotland. The cost of living and inflation was seen the top issue facing the economy by two-thirds (62%) of those polled, while living standards and wages were the next most cited issue (35%).

Diffley's work with IPPR Scotland gave respondents a framing for the MIG:

A 'living income' would mean that the government ensures nobody in society – regardless of their work status – falls below a minimum income floor (set nationally and taking into consideration their household composition). This ensures a minimum standard of living to all through a combination of a Minimum Income Guarantee delivered through social security benefits, fair work/good jobs, and the provision of key basic services.

Respondents were asked to rank various policy options on a scale from 1-5, where 1 is 'not at all' and 5 is 'very important', as to how

important a role that policy has in ensuring that nobody falls below a reasonable standard of living. The MIG concept received strong support, reaching 3.89 on the scale. However, strongest support was afforded to fair work (4.62) which points to the importance of getting the work sphere of the MIG correct in order to achieve the necessary public support.

Another question measured support for different initiatives even if it meant their own taxes were higher to resource this policy. Almost three-quarters (73%) of respondents supported 'the introduction of a guarantee (in general) to make sure nobody falls below a minimum acceptable standard of living' even if their own taxes increased to fund this. Only 12% of respondents opposed this. The 'introduction of a new targeted benefit payment to top-up incomes below a minimum income floor required for a reasonable standard of living' received 65% support with 15% opposed. There was also support for policies which have been identified in previous seminars as interim steps towards the MIG, with 70% supporting increasing benefits to disabled people and 60% supporting increasing benefits to parents to support children, even if their own taxes were higher as a result. While there is room to further boost support, this polling represents a strong starting point to build public support for the MIG, and provides insight to the interim steps which are likely to garner public support.

¹ See <https://understanding-scotland.co.uk/>

Framing the MIG



David Eyre, Communications Officer at the Poverty Alliance, spoke to the importance of framing communications to win support for policy proposals like the MIG. He talked about the work of cognitive linguist George Lakoff, who has carried out extensive research into framing, metaphor, and political communications. Lakoff says that people are strongly influenced by what is seen as ‘common sense’ in today’s society, and that idea is supported by metaphoric frames that people acquire as they grow up.

Lakoff believes that people use a metaphor of ‘family’ for government and the nation. Some people believe what is needed in this kind of a world is a strong, strict father who can protect and support the family, and teach his children right from wrong. What is required of the child is obedience, because the strict father is the moral authority who knows right from wrong. It is further assumed that the only way to teach kids obedience and discipline is through punishment when they do wrong. Such internal discipline is what is required for success in the difficult, competitive world. When people are disciplined and pursue their self-interest in this land of opportunity, they will become prosperous and self-reliant. Thus, the strict father model links morality with prosperity. The same discipline you need to be moral is what allows you to prosper, with the link being the pursuit of self-interest.

Lakoff says this frames people’s attitudes to others in the real world – the strict father model says that if people do not have enough

money then that is solely their fault, reflecting a lack of discipline. The way to get them into shape is through punishment, like sanctions and benefit caps. Life should be made hard for them, so they get into work, with social security being viewed as immoral because it is giving people something for nothing. In this frame, people with money are obviously moral, and thus deserve to be at the top of the social hierarchy. This also shapes understanding of taxation as ‘theft’ or ‘unfair’.

However, there is an opposing frame for the family, where there are nurturing parents responsible for fostering the morals of their children. The assumption is that children are born good and can be made better. The world can be made a better place, and our job is to work on that. The parents’ job is to nurture their children and to raise them to be nurturers of others. They need empathy, and that leads to the obligation to protect and support. Further, it is your moral responsibility to teach your child to be a happy, fulfilled person who wants others to be happy and fulfilled.

If you want your child to be fulfilled in life, they must be free enough to do that. Therefore, freedom is a value, and a lack of opportunity or prosperity denies this freedom. If you are connecting with your child and you empathise with them, you have to have open, honest two-way communication. That becomes a value. You live in a community, and that community will affect how your child grows up. Therefore community-building, service to the community and cooperation in a community become values.

David showed an editorial from the Scottish Daily Express on 28 April 2023, where the MIG was described as a “Deception aimed at pensioners, mothers and the workshy”.² It continued: “This will be a big incentive for the people who don’t want to work to vote for the SNP” and “so all of the shirkers south of the border will come and live in Scotland and the hard pressed and over taxed workers will move south...”. David suggested that this was a good example of how the strict father frame can play out in public discourse.

David underlined that frames, such as ‘strict fathers’ and ‘nurturing mothers’, are mental images. In real life, there are authoritarian mothers and supportive dads, with most of us

are somewhere in the middle. Lakoff says the vast majority of people are ‘bi-conceptuals’ and have both frames at play, and people’s minds can change. If we reframe issues, we can make new physical connections in people’s brains. Research by the Common Cause Foundation³ on what they call ‘The Perception Gap’ found that over three-quarters (77%) of people in the UK believe their fellow citizens hold selfish values to be more important than compassionate ones. However, in reality, 74% of people place greater importance on compassionate values than selfish values. These results, and mental frames, are important starting points for work to develop a narrative on MIG.

² Borland, Ben (2023) ‘The SNP’s £25k a year benefits plan is blatant deceit ahead of the next election’, 18th April 2023, *Scottish Daily Express*, available at <https://www.scottishdailyexpress.co.uk/comment/snps-25k-year-benefits-plan-29740441>

³ Common Cause Foundation (2016) *Perceptions Matter* available at https://commoncausefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/CCF_survey_perceptions_matter_full_report.pdf

Discussion



Attendees had the opportunity to discuss, in groups, these presentations and their thoughts on possible frames and images. A summary of the table discussions are outlined below.

Our relationship to values change over time

There was an overarching discussion about how our values change over time, and people may relate to values in different ways at different life stages. There is a need for us to apply nuance for different audiences – varying our values and what we emphasise, depending on who we are speaking to. Those who we would designate as sceptics of the MIG, or wider action to tackle poverty, also have values which inform their views. This requires us to develop multiple frames for multiple audiences to ensure we can build broad-based support. In this space, ‘compassion’ was viewed as a useful value, as this is something that everyone sees in themselves, with nobody identifying as being lacking compassion. This was also seen as being tied to useful framing around the ‘collective we’, and the idea of being united and together.

Similarly, freedom was identified as a key, useful value for engaging with groups identified to be sceptics of the MIG proposal. This has connotations of being the opposite of being “boxed-in” by poverty – providing the physical freedom of being able to afford the bus ticket to work, or the clothes for an

interview, but also the freedom to maximise your life chances, make choices about your life like changing jobs, undertaking training or returning to education.

The group saw that the values explored in the session resonated widely with those in the third sector, but pointed to a need to understand how they will resonate with the general public and legislators. There was a discussion around the need for messaging to perhaps straddle the ‘strict father’ and ‘nurturing parent’ frames to gain maximum public support and buy in.

The groups had opposing views of the same values and images, highlighting the challenges for the narrative framework

There were examples where an image gained broad support within some of the table discussions, whilst being rejected by other tables. For example, an image of men working with cement mixers was selected as a priority image by two groups. This was selected on the rationale that an image which represented paid work was important in the context of the Diffley presentation which found fair work to be the public’s top priority for ensuring nobody falls below a decent standard of living. By contrast, this image was viewed by others as falling short of the inclusivity of the MIG. The image was seen as too traditional in terms of what it means to be in work (trade) and failed to highlight diversity of the workforce (white men).

Fairness was highlighted as a useful value by two groups but rejected by the remaining group for being too open to interpretation. The basis for rejecting this frame was that values relating to ‘justice and fairness’ could be perceived negatively by those with money or resources with a sense that “I worked hard for what I have and it is not fair that I would be taxed for that”. This was also visible in the political narrative surrounding Universal Credit, introduced with the value of being ‘fair’ to taxpayers. Similarly, while ‘solidarity’ was viewed by some attendees as a useful value in terms of us all collectively paying into something that is there for us all, the term was seen as being loaded and would be off-putting to certain political groupings.

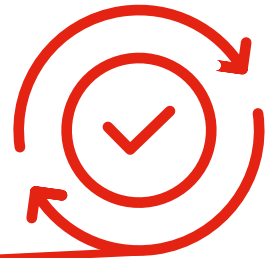
The complexity of the MIG necessitates a strong narrative framework

Policy proposals like a Universal Basic Income are inherently universal so it is easier for people immediately see how this will benefit them at an individual and familial level. As the MIG is a targeted and tailored measure, we need to ensure that the narrative we build around the MIG conveys the overall public good that it will bring, to ensure maximum buy in.

Within this, people often display a disconnect with different types of public spending. While some people are very happy for their taxes to go towards education and healthcare, others oppose the idea of social security as a public spend. There is, in some people’s minds, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ public spending. In that sense, there is a need to move away from an ‘us and them’ narrative to make clear that a MIG protects everyone. We touched on the idea that the vast majority of people in Scotland utilise public services on a daily basis – this could be through health and education, but could be as simple as driving on public roads. Making this very clear in our messaging might help connect the maximum number of people to the work of the MIG.

There was a real sense that wider support for the MIG will be achieved if people can better see themselves in the stories of others, so embedding the voices of lived experience is really important. People should be able to finish the statement, “the MIG is a good thing for me because...” This idea may have value in forthcoming campaigning on MIG.





Our collective communications framework



Attendees worked to identify values that they felt were integral to our framing of the MIG. Utilising visual prompts, they were also asked to consider the most effective imagery to accompany the narrative framework. Each group selected their top three images and top three values, and individuals were then given the opportunity to vote for their individual preferences. Images and values are presented below in order of support.

Values

- **Security**
- **Freedom**
- **Community**
- **Fairness**
- **Individual autonomy**

Image	Why selected?
<p>People helping others:</p> 	<p>People liked that this implied that even when people reach the top, they can still help each other – it highlights a group dynamic and support. It also made people think of Scotland. However, there were some concerns about how disabled people would relate to this image.</p>
<p>Building blocks:</p> 	<p>People felt this image underpinned the principles of MIG and what it was trying to achieve; felt the colours were attractive; and that this represented the idea of incremental progress towards social change.</p>
<p>Stones placed on top of each other on a hard surface:</p> 	<p>Some felt this image captured the best aspects of the building blocks (image above) while also having the benefit of not being uniform, representing the diversity of experience and individuals in Scotland, and some felt this had Scottish connotations.</p>
<p>Hand preventing dominoes from falling over:</p> 	<p>People felt that this showed support and protection, and represented the idea of a protective level (as per an income floor). However, others felt there was a lack of clarity with this image – is the hand representing a barrier, or safety?</p>

On the whole, the group preferred pictures which represented progress, with building blocks and stones viewed as reflecting the interim steps towards a MIG and the incremental nature of social change. Attendees also prioritised images which

included people, particularly those who were portrayed helping others. There was an agreement that it was refreshing to see positive imagery and rhetoric when thinking and talking about solution building.



The Poverty Alliance is Scotland's anti-poverty network. Together with our members, we influence policy and practice, support communities to challenge poverty, provide evidence through research and build public support for the solutions to tackle poverty. Our members include grassroots community groups, academics, large national NGOs, voluntary organisations, statutory organisations, trade unions, and faith groups



abrdn Financial Fairness Trust has supported this project as part of its mission to contribute towards strategic change which improves financial well-being in the UK. The Trust funds research, policy work and campaigning activities to tackle financial problems and improve living standards for people on low-to-middle incomes in the UK. It is an independent charitable foundation registered in Scotland (SC040877).