

# Talking about homes

What we can learn from  
homelessness and poverty research

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In partnership with



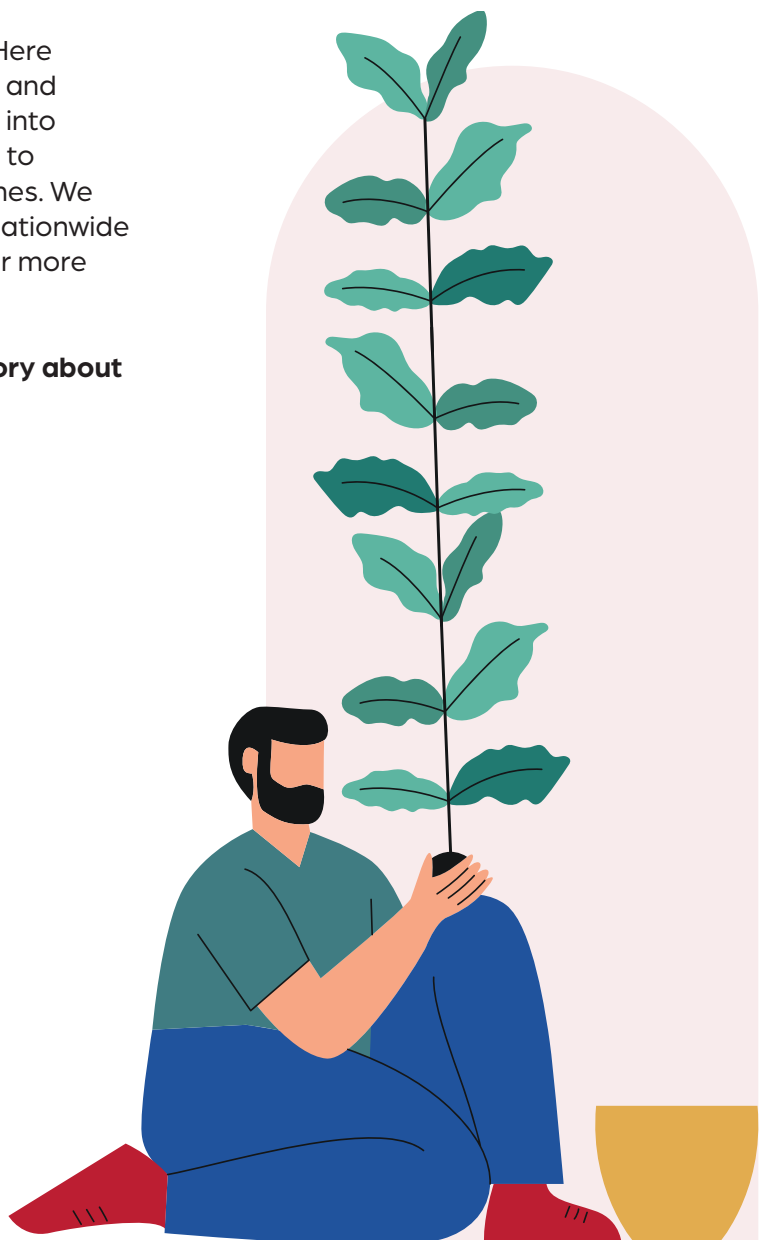
## What this guide is for

How we talk about homes matters. We all have power as communicators to tell a story about homes that will build understanding and support for solutions to make our housing system better. By drawing on consistent communications strategies, which are backed up by evidence, different organisations and voices can work together to push for progress.

That's why FrameWorks UK partnered with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) and the Nationwide Foundation to understand how people think about homes in the UK, and how to shift the conversation in ways that will lead to positive changes. Our resulting [briefing](#) and [toolkit](#) provide guidance, practical tips and tools for anyone communicating about homes in the UK.

This practical guide builds on those materials. Here we've pulled together evidence-based insights and recommendations from FrameWorks' research into homelessness with Crisis, and poverty with JRF to supplement our guidance on talking about homes. We also refer back to our earlier briefing with the Nationwide Foundation and JRF on how to build support for more social housing specifically.

**The result is a guide to telling a compelling story about homes, homelessness and poverty.**



# Our challenge

**The housing crisis isn't an issue that exists in isolation. Homes, homelessness and poverty are interlinked, with closely related causes and solutions.**

As communicators – that's anyone talking and writing about these issues – we're also up against a common set of challenges, with three ways of thinking that we need to be aware of in particular:

- ▶ **People think first and foremost about individuals' choices and behaviour** – rather than the systems that shape their circumstances. This can lead to blame, and a sense that people 'just need to work harder' in order to overcome the difficulties they face.
- ▶ **Placing responsibility on individuals also leads to stigma and othering** – the sense that these are issues that affect 'others' and are someone else's job to fix, rather than something we all have a stake in.
- ▶ **When people do think about systems, these appear big and complicated. This can fuel a sense of fatalism** – that the problem is too complex to solve. There is also a sense that 'the system is rigged' and the government is failing. For poverty and homelessness, we see this fuelling fatalism. However, for housing, we see this helping to surface thinking about government responsibility and the need for them to act.

While these mindsets pose challenges, understanding them gives us power as communicators. These are the obstacles we need to navigate around – and we can use framing insights to do so.



# Three ways to build on our story

## Recommendations in brief

1

**Appeal to people's sense of morality**

to establish common ground and collective concern – overcoming individualism, stigma and blame.

2

**Show what the issue is really about**

by connecting our homes to our health and wellbeing, and by showing how social homes can loosen poverty's grip.

3

**Counter crisis with causes and solutions**

and go further than just highlighting the housing crisis. We need to show how we got here, who is responsible and how we can fix it.



# Recommendation #1

## Appeal to people's sense of morality

Across society there are certain values that we all share. Invoking these values is a powerful way of establishing common ground and collective concern – and, in turn, overcoming individualism.

Our research into homes, homelessness and poverty all identified effective values that appealed to people's sense of morality in slightly different ways. So there are common ideas and language that we can use.

### How to do it

Appeal to morality **and** ground it in reality: pair the value with what needs to be done. This ensures your points are not just platitudes.

Talk about treating people with dignity and respect.

Appeal to people's sense of 'right and wrong', for example by using language like 'We need to do the right thing' and 'We can do better than this'.

Use collectivising language like 'we', 'us' and 'our'.

Choose which value to dial up based on the more specific challenges that we're up against in these issue areas. For example:

- ▶ Challenge: the tendency to dehumanise people experiencing homelessness.  
Dial up: the idea that we have **shared human needs** and home is a **moral human right**.
- ▶ Challenge: the belief that 'a roof over your head' is sufficient.  
Dial up: **moral responsibility** to make the case for the quality of homes. It's also a helpful opening for talking about who is responsible for improving the housing system.

**Note:** When your focus is on poverty, dial up compassion and justice. When the story you're telling is ultimately more about homes and homelessness, lead instead with moral responsibility or moral human rights, even if poverty plays a part in your message.



## Why it works

**Invoking moral responsibility strengthens the case for making decent, affordable homes available to everyone.** This is the idea that we, as a society, have a moral responsibility to make sure that everyone is treated with dignity and respect. Yet right now, we aren't living up to this obligation as we are failing to make sure people have homes that meet their needs. This helpfully builds on the 'system is rigged' thinking in ways that establish the need for responsible parties, such as our government, to act. This value worked best when paired with specific solutions to improve the housing system.

For example:

"Freezing housing benefit when rents are rising **simply isn't right**. The government must **step up, take responsibility** and unfreeze this essential support."

**In the case of homelessness, highlighting that there are human needs we all share, and that all of us have a moral right to a home, is key.** Our homelessness research found that this unifying value of **moral human rights** dislodges people's tendency to 'other' people facing homelessness and, as a result, see homelessness as an issue that doesn't warrant public concern or attention. There is crossover here with moral responsibility – the idea that everyone should be treated with dignity and respect.

For example:

"**No one should be forced to live like this** – denied a home, denied their **dignity**. Please give £XX today to help meet this **essential human need**."

**A combination of compassion and justice works best for talking about poverty.** Compassion is our belief in helping each other out in hard times and protecting each other from harm. Justice is about doing the right thing and it helps to demonstrate the need for action to tackle the causes of poverty. Compassion without justice might look like a donation to a foodbank or charity – something that helps a little in the short-term but won't fix the problem. By combining compassion with justice we can talk about how we shouldn't need charities to step in to protect people from harm; then we can talk about changing the systems that cause the problems.

For example:

"When people are facing tough times – like unexpected illness or losing a job – they can be pulled into poverty. **It's only right** that they should be shown **compassion** and supported to stay afloat. Our social security system **should be** that lifeline."



## Recommendation #2

### Show what the issue is really about

Connecting homes with another issue helps to show what this is really about and sets the scene for more productive conversations that shift understanding.

Our research showed that making our story about health, not wealth, is key. This held true when talking about social homes: we found that framing social homes as a way of preventing poverty was also productive.

#### How to do it

Overall, make it about health. Talk about the impact of our homes on our health and wellbeing – both positive and negative.

Consider talking about how social homes can prevent poverty and hardship. This could be part of a wider narrative that also connects our homes to our health and wellbeing.

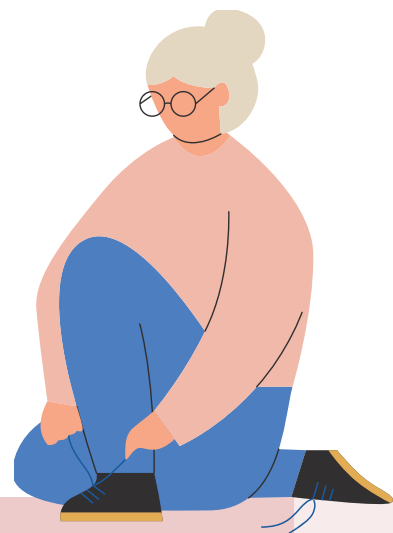
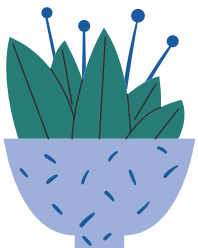
Avoid leading with economic arguments. This both triggers the idea of wealth over health, and dilutes the specific case for social homes to prevent poverty.

One way you can explain how providing social homes prevents poverty is to use the **restricts and restrains metaphor**. This helps to show how people can get locked in poverty, and how it restricts their options and opportunities. It can also be used to talk about the solutions. For example:

"Social homes help to release people from the constraints of poverty."

"Social homes unlock opportunities for people to..."

"Social homes can help to loosen poverty's grip."



## Why this works

People tend to think of homes or houses first and foremost as a source of investment and wealth. This thinking obscures why a decent and affordable home really matters. Our research found that by connecting our health and wellbeing to the quality, affordability and availability of our homes, we can build understanding of why they are so important, which reduces consumerist thinking.

Our focused research into social homes shows that health also works as a lead issue for social homes specifically: the idea that building more good-quality social homes would improve the country's physical and mental health. This research also found that making the connection with poverty was productive. In particular, this is about framing social homes as a solution for preventing and alleviating poverty.

For example:

“Having the solid foundation of a social home is essential for people who are struggling under the weight of poverty. An affordable place to call home relieves the pressure on people's lives, and on their mental health too.”





# Recommendation #3

## Counter crisis with causes and solutions

People tend to feel fatalistic about change when it comes to social issues such as these, so we need to show that change is possible.

By explaining how the housing crisis came about, we can build understanding, point to solutions, and help people see that things can be improved, rather than leaving people in crisis.

### How to do it

Do refer to the 'housing crisis', as it's a recognisable concept we can build on, but go further than simply mentioning it. The same does not apply for 'poverty crisis' or 'homelessness crisis' – avoid these terms.

Break it down. Talk about how problems in the housing system have come about, who is responsible and what needs to be done.

Talk about solutions – explain how they would work, the difference they would make, and who needs to act.

If using data and statistics, don't expect them to tell the story for you. Use [numbers in context](#) to support your story – not as a story on their own.

In our [How to talk about homes](#) toolkit, we recommend explaining how the current housing system has been **designed and can be redesigned** through specific policy changes. This is a helpful way to introduce both drivers (how we got here) and solutions that can make a difference. And this metaphor isn't unique to the housing system specifically, as we can also talk about how our economy has been designed, and so on.



## Why this works

People are already aware that homelessness and poverty are problems facing our society – this is not a gap in people’s understanding. So referring to homelessness and poverty as crises only serves to reinforce fatalism: a sense that the problems are too big to solve.

However, our homes research did find that referring to the ‘housing crisis’ is helpful to some extent. It’s a concept which people are aware of, and that we can then build on.

We do still see a sense of fatalism and the potential for crisis fatigue when talking about housing, though. So, we need to go further than simply mentioning the housing crisis.

If people understand how problems arise and can see how to solve them, they’re more likely to get behind calls for action and changes to systems. Across poverty, homelessness and homes, we need to talk about how we got here and how solutions will make a difference.

This is vital if we are to counteract a sense that these problems are too big to solve. We need to divert people away from thinking that individuals just need to work their way out of poverty and homelessness, and into better quality homes.

The metaphor of **constant pressure** helps to explain how people can be pushed into homelessness. This increases the understanding that homelessness is a result of external forces and strains, rather than assuming it’s down to individual faults and choices.

You can use this metaphor in a range of ways. Focus on the idea of an external force that is constant, that builds up over time, and that could be lessened with the right support. For example:

“Poverty weighs down on people – it’s constant. If nothing is done to lighten the load, people can be pushed into homelessness.”

“We can relieve the pressure on people’s lives by creating affordable homes and helping people get good, stable jobs.”

“Unfreezing housing benefit would ease the pressure on people with low incomes.”



# Putting it into action

Here's an example of what a story combining homes, homelessness and poverty might look like:

**Making this about health.**

"**We all need** a decent, affordable place to call home. **Our homes** should give us a sense of safety and security, and provide **the solid foundation for a healthy life.**

**Using collectivising language throughout such as 'we' and 'us'. Cueing the idea of shared needs.**

**Building on shared needs with the value of moral responsibility.**

"When we fail to make sure we all have a decent home, we're failing in our most basic **responsibility to protect dignity and prevent harm.** It isn't right.

**Mentioning the housing crisis, but not leaving people in crisis.**

"No one should be left in limbo waiting for a social home they can afford. People shouldn't be forced to stay on friends' sofas or in cramped temporary housing, or bear the constant worry of rising rents. We need the government to **face up to the housing crisis and take action.**

**Breaking the problem down, explaining how we got here and who is responsible.**

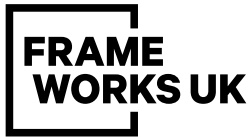
"**The government has largely abandoned social housing delivery** to private developers. This strategy isn't working and needs an **urgent redesign.**

**Using the redesign metaphor to show systems at work and how they can be changed.**

**Talking about solutions.**

"Our government needs to step up and take responsibility for **building more social homes.** This would be an investment in **our nation's health, and would loosen poverty's grip** on many people who are struggling to pay unaffordable rents in privately rented homes."

**Bringing it back to health again. Also nodding to how social homes can prevent poverty.**



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This FrameWorks UK briefing is part of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Nationwide Foundation's co-funded Talking about Housing project.

Any questions? Get in touch at [talkingabouthousing@jrf.org.uk](mailto:talkingabouthousing@jrf.org.uk)

For more information about framing, visit [FrameWorksUK.org](http://FrameWorksUK.org)

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## Further resources

- ▶ [How to talk about homes \(toolkit\)](#)
  - ▶ [Talking about homes: the foundation for a decent life \(research briefing\)](#)
  - ▶ [Moving from concern to concrete change: how to build support for more social housing \(research briefing\)](#)
  - ▶ [Talking about homelessness \(toolkit\)](#)
  - ▶ [Talking about poverty \(toolkit\)](#)
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