

Talking about homes: the foundation for a decent life

A Strategic Brief in partnership with the
Nationwide Foundation and the Joseph
Rowntree Foundation

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About FrameWorks UK

We collaborate with mission-driven organisations to communicate about social issues in ways that will create change.

FrameWorks UK is the sister organisation of the FrameWorks Institute in the US. Our research shows how people understand social issues. And we use this knowledge to develop and test strategic communications to help organisations create change.

Change the story. Change the world.

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Foreword

At the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Nationwide Foundation, we know that there are many like-minded organisations trying to galvanise public support for systemic changes to improve the quality and affordability of homes in the UK. Yet homes are not the top priority in politics. While people know we are facing a housing crisis, they are less clear on how we got here and the solutions that are needed.

Through this project, co-funded by the Nationwide Foundation and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, we want to empower communicators to overcome significant obstacles in current public thinking about housing and homes by changing the discourse. We hope that building people's awareness and understanding will lead to pressure for change and will consequently drive policymakers to take positive action.

Our collaboration began in 2019 and was encouraged by the growing appetite for previous framing work. *Talking about Poverty* by FrameWorks and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation revealed how to change the narrative around poverty. Together, the Nationwide Foundation and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, organisations which both have a commitment to increasing the availability of decent and affordable homes, funded FrameWorks to develop the core story for housing.

The output of the research is this evidence-based brief, intended to support anyone communicating about the need for more decent and affordable homes. It tells us how to communicate strategically about the existing problems and how they impact people, as well as how to explain what can be done to solve them.

We are delighted to have concluded the research phase of our project. Our thanks go to the committed and insightful team at FrameWorks for delivering this robust work and allowing us as the funders to come on this journey with them.

In addition, we are grateful for the commitment and input we've received from our advisory group members throughout this research phase. Their eagerness to find a better way to communicate about housing and to offer their thoughts on the emerging findings has been immeasurably useful.

In many ways, for us, the hard work starts now, as we embark on disseminating and embedding the frames in our own messaging and also encouraging and supporting others to do the same. The accompanying toolkit provides practical guidance and further examples of how to use these recommendations in communications.

Now that we have this proven research, we hope it gives us all the insight and confidence to deliver impactful communications that change hearts and minds, and ultimately lead to vital changes.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation

The Nationwide Foundation

Find out more and access other reports from this project, as well as the toolkit, at:

jrf.org.uk/housing/talking-about-housing

Introduction

Decent and affordable homes make our lives better – benefitting our mental and physical health and providing the safe and secure foundation we all need. But shortages and unequal access to housing mean that too many people are being forced to live in overpriced and poor-quality homes. The cost and shortage of decent homes is a challenge that must be met if we are to build a better, more equal society in which everyone can thrive.

People need answers. They know the current housing system isn't working, but they don't know how these problems can be solved. People know housing shortages and unequal access to housing are issues that have become worse over time, but they don't understand how we got here or feel that it's possible to change things. And the stories we hear about housing in the media too often focus on the rise and fall of property prices while missing what's really at stake – **that homes are fundamental for a decent life**. We need to start telling a new story – a story that will answer these questions and shine a light on what really matters.

The framing strategy and specific recommendations in this brief are designed to help shape that new story – building public understanding and support for solutions which will make our housing system better. They are part of broader framing research on housing conducted by FrameWorks from 2019 to 2022, in partnership with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Nationwide Foundation.¹

In this research, we found that there are significant obstacles in current public thinking about housing:

- People mainly think of housing as a consumer product, with homes seen first and foremost as a source of investment and wealth. This idea gets in the way of seeing a home as an essential foundation from which to build a decent life.
- This link between homes and wealth means that people see owning a home as the ideal that everyone should aspire to. As a result, rented and social housing is seen as temporary, and the quality of these homes isn't considered important by comparison. 'A roof over your head' is considered sufficient while you're there.
- Although people have a basic understanding of how poor-quality housing negatively affects people's lives, they are less clear about exactly how decent and affordable homes *positively* affect people.
- People think that the inequalities in the current housing system are the result of 'natural' forces that are beyond anyone's control. They assume that the 'invisible hand' of our economy dictates how the housing system works and don't understand how government policy has created and affects the system.

- While people understand that the housing system isn't working for everyone, they tend to put this down to differences between individuals or groups – that is, they draw on problematic, negative ideas about race and social class. For example, they might reason that overcrowded housing is the result of 'cultural differences', or that to get a decent and affordable home people 'just need to work hard'. This reasoning tends to be more front of mind, rather than identifying the issues as lying with the housing system.

Our research shows we can overcome these obstacles in thinking by making particular choices about how we frame our communications. We need to do the following:

- Shift thinking away from housing as a consumer good and towards homes as essential to a decent life.
- Tell a story with solutions and explanation at its heart to counter the fatalistic idea that the current housing system is 'natural' and can't be improved and to show how it both can and must be changed.

These changes in how we talk about homes can be achieved through the recommendations detailed in this brief. These include the following:

1. Talk about homes as a source of health and wellbeing to build understanding of why access to decent and affordable homes matters.
2. Use an explanatory metaphor to show how decent, affordable homes are essential – we recommend using 'clean air' or 'foundations'.
3. Invoke people's sense of moral responsibility to build the case for making decent and affordable housing available to everyone.
4. Combine a critical tone with explanations of systemic solutions to build a sense of urgency and efficacy.
5. Put individual stories in context to bring systemic changes in the housing system to life.

This is where communicators in the housing sector come in. Together, we can provide people with answers – about how the system is designed and how it can be redesigned through policy and practice change to give everyone access to decent and affordable homes. We can tell a story capable of **shifting the dominant understanding of housing as a source of wealth to homes as essential to a decent life.**

What is framing, and why does it matter?

Framing is the choices we make about what we say and how we say it. It's what we emphasise, how we explain an issue, and what we leave unsaid. These choices affect how people think, feel and act.

The way in which a communication is framed shapes how we interpret and respond to that information. When new frames enter public discourse, they can shift how people make sense of an issue – how they understand it, how they decide who is responsible for addressing problems, and what kinds of solutions they support. As a result, frames are a critical part of social change. By shifting how the public thinks about an issue, they change the context for collective decision-making and can make new types of action possible.

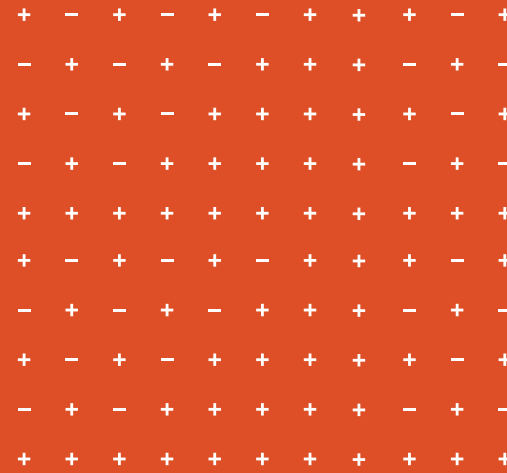
Unlike a set of key messages, frames can be used and adapted to a variety of different contexts, enabling us to tailor communications for different audiences and channels while continuing to talk about our issue in a consistent way.

Our research

The strategy and recommendations are based on evidence – tested and verified through rigorous research and analysis. FrameWorks researchers conducted qualitative and quantitative research with members of the public throughout the UK. This comprised interviews and peer-discourse sessions (a type of focus group) with diverse members of the public, as well as experimental surveys with a nationally representative sample of the UK population.

Through these methods, we tested and identified framing strategies that will move public thinking in productive directions – leveraging the openings and navigating the obstacles.

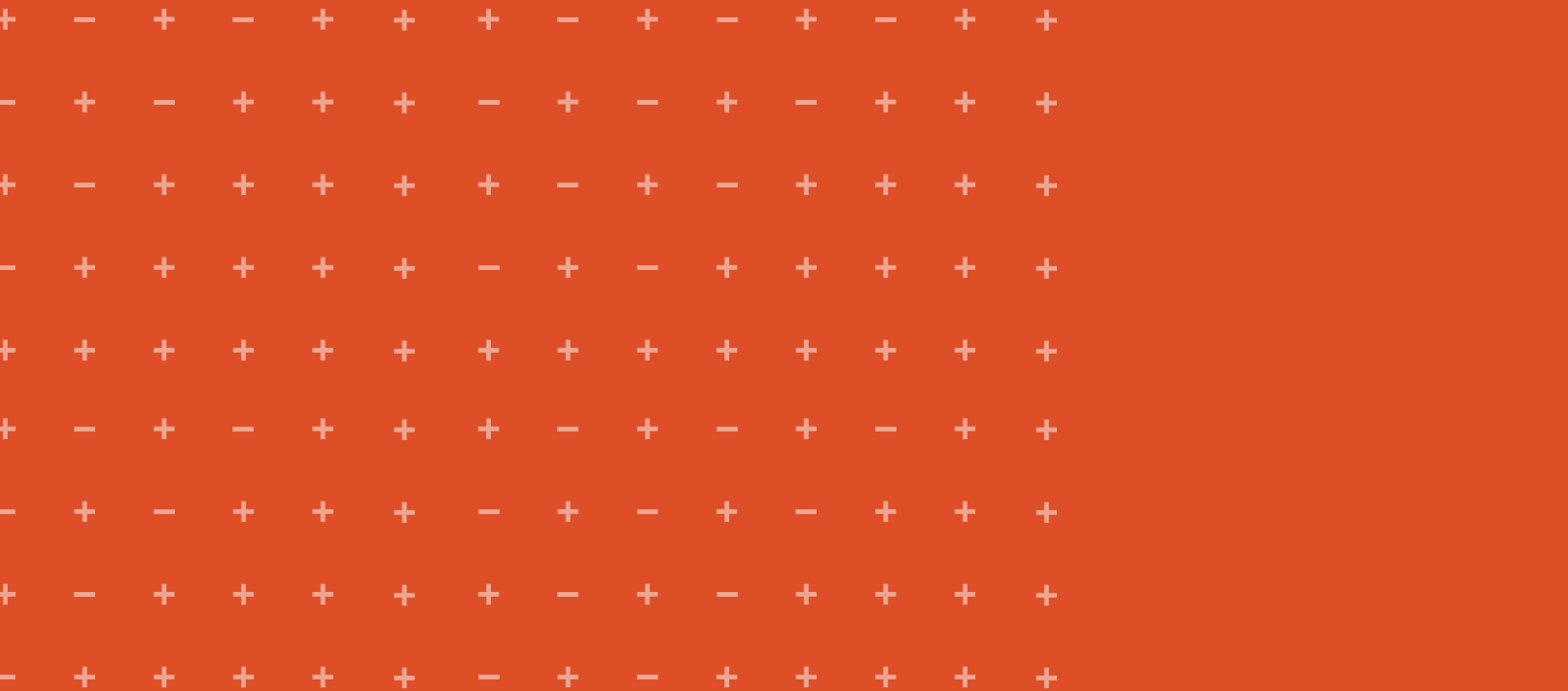
A full description of the methods and sample are available as an appendix to this brief.



SECTION TWO

Recommendations

How to tell a story that builds the understanding: decent, affordable homes are essential for a decent life.



Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Talk about homes as a source of health and wellbeing to build understanding of why access to decent and affordable homes matters

What to do

- **Position** the current problems with the housing sector as problems that affect people's health and wellbeing. This will demonstrate why it matters that the housing sector doesn't work for people the way it should.
- **Explain** how decent and affordable homes are essential for people's health and wellbeing, especially their mental health. Focusing on mental health and how it can be supported by a decent and affordable home will resonate with people as a highly relevant and timely issue.
- **Give examples** of how decent and affordable homes positively affect people's health. This will expand people's understanding beyond only thinking about the negative effects of a poor-quality home on health.

Why this works

People tend to think of housing first and foremost as a commodity that should make a profit for the owner rather than as integral to every aspect of our lives. This thinking makes it hard for people to see why a decent and affordable home really matters because the idea of housing as a means to make money is more prominent than home as a place where people can build their lives.

While people do have some understanding of how their home is integral to their own quality of life, this is something we need to remind people of – and encourage them to see that it applies to everyone. Talking about homes as a source of health and wellbeing helps to foreground and leverage people's understanding of why a decent and affordable home matters and is something that everyone needs.

Moreover, explaining how a decent and affordable home positively affects people's health and wellbeing will help expand people's existing understanding beyond the negative effects of poor-quality, high-cost housing. By shifting the focus to the positive impact that a decent and affordable home has on people's lives, the health and wellbeing frame helps build people's understanding of what homes can offer people, which in turn can help build a sense of collective efficacy – that something can be done to make decent and affordable homes more accessible for all.

While talking about decent and affordable homes as a source of physical health can be useful to build understanding, focusing on how decent and affordable homes positively affect mental health is especially productive. Talking about housing as an issue of mental health is highly resonant for the public, likely related to the increased salience of this issue in public discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, for people who identified as centrist, using this health and wellbeing frame significantly reduced consumerist thinking about housing and increased collective efficacy for affordable housing. And for left-leaning people, this frame significantly increased agreement with the idea that housing should be both decent and affordable.

Example

Instead of ...

Everyone needs well-kept, safe and stable housing. When people don't have housing that's affordable, they suffer. For too long we've seen how high-cost, poor-quality housing affects people's lives. We need to make sure everyone in the UK has access to affordable housing.

Try ...

Our homes affect our health and wellbeing. Everyone needs a well-maintained and secure home so they can lead a good life. Decent, affordable homes support our physical and mental health. Instead of burdening people with unnecessary stresses and strains, they provide comfort and safety. To ensure people's mental health is supported, we need to make sure everyone in the UK has access to a decent home at a reasonable cost.

Talk about 'homes'

As much as possible, refer to decent and affordable *homes* rather than *housing* or *property*. The language of 'homes' invokes the relationships and things that people need in their lives – beyond simply a roof over their heads – and is more likely to build understanding of a 'home as essential for a decent life'. Whereas 'housing' and, even more so, 'property', are more likely to trigger thoughts of a 'house as an asset'.

Tread carefully if talking about the economic benefits of decent and affordable homes

Our research found that talking about decent and affordable housing in terms of the economic prosperity it affords individuals and society doesn't shift thinking away from housing solely as a commodity or build understanding of why making access to decent and affordable homes for all matters. As much as possible, focus the issue on how decent and affordable homes enrich people's health and wellbeing – the value they bring to our lives, rather than to our economy.

If you need to frame an economic argument for housing, we recommend only doing this after first establishing the benefits to people's health and wellbeing. Providing explanations of how decent and affordable housing helps people thrive, and how that in turn benefits the economy (via a healthy workforce, for example), will help shift people's thinking towards understanding housing as an integral part of people's lives.

Recommendation 2: Use an explanatory metaphor to show how decent, affordable homes should be an essential priority

Choose to use either the ‘clean air’ or the ‘foundations’ metaphor to highlight how decent, affordable homes are fundamental to our lives, and how it is the responsibility of the government and others like Local Authorities, developers, and landlords to prioritise quality and affordability.

Metaphors give us new, yet familiar, ways to think about an issue. Explanatory metaphors provide a strong mental image, make abstract or complex concepts simple and concrete, and can provide a comparison which helps build people’s understanding in a very immediate way.

Our research found two metaphors which helped to shift people’s thinking about housing and build understanding about the importance of making decent and affordable homes accessible for all. Only use one metaphor in a single communication to avoid confusion and make clear the points you want to get across.

A) Clean air: *A decent, affordable home is as essential as having clean air to breathe*

What to do

- **Compare** decent and affordable housing to clean air: essential to be able to live a decent life.
- **Identify who’s responsible** with the metaphor. Clean air needs to be achieved collectively, and the government has a responsibility to bring in regulations to improve its quality. So too must the government, and others in positions of power, take responsibility for fixing the current housing crisis.
- **Keep it simple.** Try not to overwork this metaphor – the connection only needs to be light-touch to build on people’s understanding.
- **Stick to *clean air*** as much as possible rather than flipping to talk about negative ‘polluted’ or ‘unclean’ air. This will help focus the conversation on the positive effects of decent and affordable housing rather than on the negative effects of costly, poor-quality housing, which are already more top of mind for people.

Why it works

This metaphor highlights two key aspects of our new story about homes. Firstly, it establishes decent, affordable homes as essential – much like the connection with health and wellbeing in Recommendation 1.

Secondly, it counters the fatalistic assumption that the current housing system is shaped by forces that are outside any individual or societal control. The comparison of housing with clean air helps people see how, just as air quality can be improved through government regulation, so too can – and should – our housing system.

When the ‘clean air’ metaphor is paired with specific policy solutions, it can broaden people’s understanding of the concrete ways that the housing market can be changed to make decent and affordable homes more accessible for everyone (rather than only focusing on the current problems with it).

Examples

- *Having a decent and affordable home is like having clean air to breathe. Just as people need more than just any kind of air to function well and be healthy, people need more than just any roof over their head to live healthy, happy lives.*
- *A decent, affordable home is as essential as having clean air to breathe. Just as the government should ensure we can breathe clean air, it should ensure we can all access a decent and affordable home. That’s why we’re calling for <insert policy solution>.*

B) Foundations: *Decent, affordable homes are the foundation for people’s lives*

This metaphor was effective for communicating to **people on the right of the political spectrum**.² For this group, the metaphor helped shift people’s thinking away from a ‘house as an asset’ to ‘home as essential to life’. It also helped build support for specific policy changes, such as building more social housing and limiting social rent to one-third of people’s income. It didn’t backfire for people on the left or centre, but we didn’t see the same shift in thinking – this is likely because we saw more baseline support for reform from people on the left. So, we recommend this metaphor if people on the right are your priority audience.

What to do

- **Describe** decent and affordable homes as the foundation of a decent life.
- **Use** the ‘foundations’ metaphor to talk about the effects that decent and affordable homes have on life outcomes.
- **Give examples** of how government policymaking on housing has failed to create strong foundations for people’s lives and how they could do better. This will help focus on government responsibility and downplay individualistic understandings of the housing crisis.

Why it works

Talking about homes as the strong foundation of people’s lives helps shift thinking away from housing as a consumer good. It builds understanding of the effects of housing on life outcomes and of the government’s role in fixing the current unequal housing market and housing shortage. While this metaphor was not observed to boost support for change among other politically aligned people, it didn’t backfire or undermine their support either.

Example

- *Decent, affordable homes are the foundations for people's lives. For too long, these foundations have been undermined by <add concrete issue/poor policy>. We need the government to <add solution> so that everyone has a firm footing to build a good life.*

Recommendation 3: Invoke people's sense of moral responsibility to build the case for making decent and affordable housing available to everyone

What to do

- **Talk** about making decent and affordable homes available to everyone as a collective moral obligation. Framing housing in this way will help build a sense of collective responsibility.
- **Pair** the *Moral Responsibility* value with concrete policy solutions. Giving specific examples of policies that will ensure the provision of decent and affordable homes will help build a sense of collective efficacy that improving the housing sector is possible.
- **Connect** solutions with systemic changes to steer thinking away from individualism.

Why it works

This is an example of a 'values frame'. Values frames tap into the deeply shared beliefs that guide our thinking and behaviour. They establish a common ground around an idea that we hold as important.

By positioning the need for decent and affordable homes for all as something we have a moral responsibility to address, we make it a collective rather than an individual issue. This helps to counter the default idea that individuals simply need to work harder so they can afford better quality housing. And pairing the value with concrete policy solutions also helps overcome thinking that the housing system is 'naturally' unequal and that nothing can be done to change this on a systemic level.

To overcome people's fatalism and build a sense of collective (rather than individual) responsibility, invoke the idea that society has a moral responsibility to make decent and affordable homes accessible to everyone. Talking about our collective moral obligation to ensure everyone has access to a decent and affordable home (not just any type of housing) will also help expand people's thinking beyond housing as a temporary, basic need. Moreover, focusing on society's collective moral obligation to provide decent and affordable homes can help build support for policy change and build understanding that these systemic changes are both necessary and possible.⁵

Our research shows a need to pair the idea of moral responsibility with specific policy solutions for making decent, affordable housing more accessible to all. This combination strengthens the case and will help to further steer people away from an individualistic interpretation of moral responsibility. Moral responsibility was particularly helpful for shifting policy support from people on the right of the political spectrum.

Examples

- *As a society, we have a moral responsibility to ensure everyone has a decent and affordable home. That's why we need <add concrete solution>.*
- *Right now, too many people are being forced to live in high-cost, poor-quality homes that are putting a strain on their mental and physical health. We can't stand by and let this happen. That's why we must <add concrete solution> and rebuild our broken housing system.*
- *We all need a decent, safe place to call home. It isn't right that so many people are living with the constant worry of whether they'll be able to pay their rent this month. We need to do better. <Add concrete solution> would help ensure everyone can afford a decent home.*

Recommendation 4: Combine a critical tone with explanations of systemic solutions to build a sense of urgency and efficacy

What to do

- **Use a critical tone** to describe the current housing situation and call it the 'crisis' it really is. People are aware of the housing crisis, and labelling it as such leverages people's existing understanding of the situation and demonstrates urgency.
- **Focus** in on a specific part of the issue and how it has come about. Talk about how housing shortages and barriers to people having access to decent and affordable homes today are a result of past policymaking.
- **Explain** which housing policies can address these issues, what they involve, and how they will help. People are largely unaware of specific housing policies, so they need clear explanation of what each policy involves and exactly how it will address the current problems with the system. Tangible explanation will help build people's understanding and counteract fatalism.

Why it works

People recognise that the current housing system is unequal and doesn't work for many – or even most – people. Using a critical tone can activate this thinking in productive ways, particularly one that is critical of 'how things are'. A critical tone opens up thinking about 'how we got here' (through

past policymaking, for example) and emphasises the role of those in positions of power (such as the government) in addressing the housing crisis.

A critical tone in messaging leverages and expands people's understanding of the government's role in the shaping the housing system and helps give a sense of urgency about the need for decent and affordable homes for everyone. Talking about the current housing system as being in crisis also helps leverage people's existing understanding of how poor-quality and costly housing negatively affects people's lives.

When paired with specific policy solutions, the critical tone is especially productive and overcomes the fatalism that sometimes occurs when people aren't provided with solutions. Solutions that focus on tangible policy changes – such as changing the definition of affordability to be no more than one-third of household income, expanding housing benefits, and creating a national landlord registry – are particularly effective in building people's understanding of what should be done to address the unequal housing system and make it work better for all.

Examples

- *Right now, we're facing a national housing crisis. One of the symptoms of this crisis is private renters being forced to live in poor-quality homes which put their health at risk. The government cannot continue to stand by and let landlords take advantage of people. They must introduce a National Landlord Register to hold landlords to account and give Local Authorities more power to uphold renters' rights.*
- *We're facing a national housing crisis, and it's time for the government to step up. Too many people are being forced to pay a massive portion of their income on rent, as the government has failed to protect them from runaway market rates. Creating a clearer definition of 'affordable housing' that keeps rent below one-third of local household income will ensure homes are genuinely affordable for people who need it most.*

Design/redesign

When people think about concepts like the economy and the housing system, they tend to think these are beyond individual or societal control – that these systems are 'natural' and 'too big' to influence. When it comes to homes, people often assume that the housing system has always been and will always be unequal, with rising costs and decreasing quality of homes, and that it's impossible to change the way the system works.

In addition to being critical of the current system and explaining solutions, we can counteract this fatalism by explaining how the current housing system has been **designed and can be redesigned** through specific policy changes. This challenges the notion that the system is 'natural' and can't be changed. Similarly, language such as **build/rebuild** and **programme/reprogramme** does the same job of exposing how the system was created and does not have to stay as it is.⁴

Connecting specific ways to redesign the housing system – such as prioritising increasing the number of social homes – with the positive effects this has on people's health and wellbeing will go one step further in offering concrete solutions that people can relate to.

Example

- *Our housing system is in crisis, but it doesn't have to be this way. Our government has the power and the responsibility to rebuild the broken system, starting with <insert specific solution>. With these changes, we can rebuild a system that provides decent, affordable homes for all and helps everyone live happy, healthy lives.*

Recommendation 5: Put individual stories in context to bring systemic changes to the housing system to life

What to do

- **Find** ways to make an individual's experience part of a larger systemic story, particularly one that tells the story of the government's role in the housing crisis.
- **Tell** positive as well as negative stories. Balance out negative stories of bad housing policies and their effects on individuals – which are accurate and necessary to tell – with positive stories about what happens when people have access to decent and affordable homes.
- **Bring** in solutions to address systemic inequalities. Pair stories (both negative and positive ones) with specific policy solutions that address the housing crisis.

Why it works

People's emphasis on individualism – that individual work ethic matters more than systems and structures – comes up when they think about who 'deserves' access to decent and affordable housing. To overcome this thinking and help people understand the role that systems play, be sure to put individuals' stories into context when using narratives to talk about housing. This means clearly citing how poor policies or lack of action have negatively affected people and how positive policies have (or would have) a positive impact.

Bringing the role of government and others like Local Authorities, developers and landlords into individual stories will help shift thinking towards a systemic understanding of housing shortages and inequality. It fills in the gaps rather than leaving people to assume that individuals are solely responsible for their housing situation and that living in poor-quality housing is due to people just needing to work harder.

Narratives about individual experiences of the housing sector can give a more humanised, detailed and relevant picture of what's wrong with the current housing system and what needs to change. Without a broader context, however, individual stories can often trigger individualistic thinking about who's responsible for causing an issue and for solving it.⁵ Previous FrameWorks research on poverty and homelessness demonstrates that individual storytelling needs to be connected to a broader context to avoid unproductive ideas that blame individuals and mean people fail to see how larger systems and structures are responsible.⁶

Telling stories within this systemic context can be paired with other frames. For example, talk about decent and affordable housing as a source of health and wellbeing to highlight the positive effects that decent and affordable homes have on people. Or combine a critical tone about the housing crisis with stories about how we got here and what needs to change.

Examples

— **Negative impact narrative + critical tone and policy explanation**

Adam is renting privately because there is a severe shortage of affordable social housing in his area. He receives housing benefit to help him pay his rent but, because this support has been frozen, it doesn't cover the cost. He's left short by nearly £300 every month. Adam told us, "I'm already working hard but my pay doesn't make ends meet. If I lose my flat, there's no plan B. I feel so hopeless." Until the government fixes our broken housing system, and there are enough genuinely affordable homes to meet demand, housing benefit must cover the cost of private rents for people on low incomes.

If the UK government invested in housing benefit so that it covered just the cheapest third of private rents, it could protect thousands of people in Adam's situation. It would also lift thousands more, including over 35,000 children, out of poverty.

— **Positive impact narrative + link to health and wellbeing**

Our homes are the foundation for our health and wellbeing. We see this in Lisa's story. Lisa and her family were finally able to move into decent, affordable social housing in January, and it's been life-changing. Their previous home was riddled with mould and felt damp even on warm summer days. It triggered Lisa's child's asthma and was a constant source of worry. Their new home is warm and dry, and Lisa could see a difference in her child's health just weeks after moving in. Lisa told us 'It's like a weight has been lifted.'

Families shouldn't be left in limbo, living with damp and mould due to a shortage of decent affordable homes. We urgently need the government to prioritise building more high-quality social housing so that every family has a strong foundation for a good life.

Conclusion

To make the case for more decent, affordable housing, we need to tell a new story: a story which highlights how our homes are fundamental to a decent life, with solutions and explanation at its heart.

We need to connect homes with our health and wellbeing and use metaphor to further highlight how the quality of our homes and the quality of our lives are intrinsically linked. We need to harness people's sense of moral responsibility and provide them with clear explanations and stories of how the system can be improved for all. We need to show how the system has faults, but that they are not inevitable – that we must rebuild our broken housing system, and that the government and others like Local Authorities, developers and landlords have the power and responsibility to do so.

In doing this, we can counter the fatalistic idea that the flawed housing system is 'natural' and can't be improved. And we can show what's really at stake: health, not wealth. We can show people that change is not only urgent and essential, but possible.

Endnotes

1. Miller, T. L., L'Hôte, E., Rochman, A., O'Shea, P., & Smirnova, M. (2021). *Communicating about housing in the UK: Obstacles, openings, and emerging recommendations*. FrameWorks Institute, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, & Nationwide Foundation.
(2018). *Reframing homelessness in the United Kingdom*. FrameWorks Institute.
2. To measure political ideology, we use a 7-point scale on which the political views a person might hold are arranged from 'extremely left-wing' to 'extremely right-wing': 1 = extremely left-wing; 2 = fairly left-wing; 3 = slightly left-of-centre; 4 = centre; 5 = slightly right-of-centre; 6 = fairly right-wing; 7 = extremely right-wing
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