



**Our common  
experience:**

The big idea that  
can help end  
homelessness

**Summary Report**  
May 2018



**Together  
we will end  
homelessness**

## Our common experience: the big idea that can help end homelessness

To end homelessness for good, a powerful new big idea must replace old notions of charity, pity and inevitability.

A new investigation by the FrameWorks Institute in partnership with Crisis concludes that public attitudes to homelessness can and must change. Homelessness isn't inevitable. We can change the way we frame homelessness to build public support and political commitment for action and change. This practical guide explains how.

Communicators, campaigners and experts need to move to a common experience frame.

This has three key features:

1. Our commonality and shared moral status
2. The lived experience of homelessness
3. Systems and solutions

To bring this idea to life, we need to tell a new story that:

- Conveys our shared **moral human right** to dignity and respect
- Highlights that **what affects one of us affects all of us**
- Explains what causes homelessness using the '**constant pressure**' metaphor
- Helps people understand **how it feels** to be homeless or in unstable housing
- Features a **wide range of people's stories**, including 'hidden homeless' people
- **Avoids** othering language
- Directs people to concrete **solutions**
- Is re-told many times in different ways across all communications including **fundraising appeals**
- **Avoids** claims that we are all at risk of homelessness

### Background

Homelessness remains a critical social problem because of a shortage of affordable housing, the lingering effects of a deep economic recession and government cuts to housing and other social benefits.

Attempts to secure policy change that will ensure everyone has a safe, stable home to live in are being thwarted by negative public attitudes, unhelpful media narratives and misunderstandings about the issue.

It doesn't need to be like this.

It is possible to build a deeper understanding of how homelessness happens and how it can be solved. This summary provides the building blocks for a new way of thinking about homelessness. It has the flexibility for many voices and stories to shape it.

Framing an issue effectively means doing things a little differently to standard campaigning or awareness raising.

### What is framing? General guiding principles

- Be clear about what you want to communicate and your intended impact.
- Know what you're up against – and the opportunities available – by understanding how people think and feel.
- Make deliberate choices about how information is presented: what to emphasise, what to explain and what to leave unsaid.
- Trigger certain ways of thinking and bypass others – it's very hard to argue against a feeling or belief once it's activated.

- Say why it matters – don't just tell it like it is – by aligning your solutions with people's ideals of what's desirable and good.
- Show that change is possible, not that problems are unsolvable.
- Equip your audience to think differently – don't meet them where they are.

## Recommendations

### 1. Understand public thinking to change it

People make automatic assumptions and have some set beliefs about homelessness:

1. Rough sleeping is the only form of homelessness the public are aware of and concerned about.
2. People believe homelessness only affects certain types of people, for example middle aged men or young runaways.
3. Homelessness is seen as the result of poor choices and lack of effort—or a deliberate decision to live outside of society's rules.
4. People don't think homelessness can be prevented, it can only be dealt with after the event and even then, only when people want help.
5. Homelessness is seen as an inevitable and unsolvable social problem.

It is very easy to activate these beliefs. Often communications about homelessness inadvertently strengthen these ideas. These framing recommend change how people think about homelessness and build support for the policy changes that can end homelessness.



### 2. Use the value of Moral Human Rights to connect and drive policy support

Saying clearly and powerfully why something matters is vital. It helps people connect with an issue, see it as relevant, and to be open to hearing and being moved by a message.

Highlighting that everyone has a right to dignity and respect—that this is part of our basic humanity—increases people's feeling of responsibility for addressing homelessness. It boosts support for change, including strengthening benefits.

This unifying Moral Human Rights frame dislodges the tendency to see homeless people as "different" and "other" and the issue as one that doesn't warrant public concern or attention.

#### Before

"We are experiencing a homelessness crisis in the UK with shocking rises in rough sleeping. We need urgent action to move people off the streets and out of danger. The government must act now."

#### After

"Everyone has the right to live with dignity and respect – this requires access to decent and secure housing. Yet right now increasing numbers of people in our country are homeless. We can and must do better – the government needs to act now to provide more social housing that all homeless people can access."

Critically, this is not an assertion of legal rights. Communicators must explain how homelessness violates the moral underpinnings of human rights. By emphasising our shared humanity in this way, communicators can connect powerfully with the sense that society must take action to put things right.



### 3. Use the value of **Interdependence** to place the issue of homelessness in a social context

Highlighting the connections and interdependence between all members of our society brings the social causes of homelessness into view. Priming communications with this value also gives people the sense that tackling homelessness is a social and collective responsibility.

Talking about how we are all connected—socially and economically—increases support for preventative policies and a more robust benefits system.

#### **Before**

"Homelessness brings enormous costs to our society. The financial cost in the UK is estimated to be around a billion pounds annually with untold human costs including social isolation, lack of access to work and training and deteriorating mental and physical health."

#### **After**

"What affects one of us affects all of us. When some people are struggling, it hurts everyone. Being homeless or at risk of becoming homeless makes it very hard to have a decent life and take part in society. Making sure that everyone has safe, stable housing benefits us all by creating a stronger, more productive society."

This frame gets people to care more about the issue and increases their desire to change it. It helps people see that homelessness matters for everyone.



### 4. Explain the causes of homelessness by using the **Constant Pressure metaphor**

Communications that explain and illustrate how something works are powerful. By giving people a memorable mental picture of how poverty and other social factors cause homelessness, we enable people to see beyond individuals, to systems. This creates fertile ground for considering the importance of new policies and different types of solutions.

The Constant Pressure metaphor is an effective, vivid and true-to-life way of explaining how homelessness happens. The familiar concept of pressure connects with people and brings systemic factors to the forefront of thinking. Crucially, it does this by allowing people to identify powerfully with homeless people without othering them.

The metaphor illustrates the effects of outside forces on people's lives in a palpable and inescapable way. It conveys the idea that things can happen that are beyond their control, steering deftly away from the unproductive assumption that 'people make their own choices and lot in life.' It also forges a strong link between poverty and homelessness, creating opportunities to shift attitudes across both issues.

#### **Before**

"Homelessness is caused by a complex interplay between a person's individual circumstances and factors outside their control. These problems can build up over time until the final crisis moment when a person becomes homeless. This crisis moment can arise from a relationship break up, the loss of a job or a mental health breakdown."

### Example of the **Constant Pressure** metaphor

"Poverty puts pressure on people, like water pushing against a dam—it's constant and strong. If the pressure builds up, the dam can break and people can be pushed into homelessness."

This pressure comes from high housing costs, low wages, and inadequate government support, building up, until it's close to a breaking point. A sudden increase in pressure from a life event—like losing a job, a relationship breakdown, or a health crisis— can quickly become a rushing flood that pushes people into homelessness."



## 5. Tell a wider range of stories about the lived experience of homelessness

Stories that describe the lived experience of homelessness are a powerful way to engage people and raise the salience of the issue. By making the experience of homelessness accessible to people, stories of lived experience generate concern and open space for prioritising policy solutions.

Stories about rough sleeping tap into people's existing mental picture of homelessness—when people think about homelessness, they think of rough sleeping. Yet it is vital for communicators to tell a range of stories about homelessness, to expand people's understanding of what homelessness looks and feels like.

By telling stories that don't fit people's existing mental image, communicators can, over time, expand what people think about when they think about homelessness. That way, people will come to recognize that homelessness includes a wide range of types of housing loss or insecurity.

Telling stories about different types of homelessness, such as people who are sofa surfing or living in other forms of temporary housing, are harder for people to process, precisely because they don't fit people's mental image of homelessness. These stories can be powerfully combined with the Constant Pressure metaphor.

This provides the necessary context and helps them make sense of these types of stories.

### Example of a **Constant Pressure** story

Poverty puts pressure on people, like water pushing against a dam. Scott was under constant pressure from his high rent and low-paying, zero-hours contract job. When he got ill, the pressure became too much and Scott was pushed into homelessness. Now, he's sleeping on sofas and floors. People welcome him in for a few nights, only to tell him that he'll have to find somewhere else to go. His health continues to crumble and there's nothing he can do about it.

Scott's story shows us what happens when our society leaves people exposed to this kind of pressure. We need to make sure that no one has to face Scott's situation by working upstream to prevent homelessness. This means acting to fix our housing market so people have access to stable affordable housing.



## 6. Avoid othering language

While experiential stories are a crucial part of an effective framing strategy, these are not traditional charity or pity stories. Experiential stories help people connect in meaningful ways with people who have experienced homelessness. They close the distance between people who have not experienced housing insecurity and people who have.

Charity stories, by contrast, use othering language—language that explicitly or implicitly treats homeless people as “those” people that “we” need to help. This creates distance, evoking sadness or pity for “them”. While charity stories may lead people to donate money to help people who are experiencing homelessness, they undermine the idea of a common and shared experience.



## 7. Seal the story by directing people to concrete solutions

When a message lacks a clear policy “ask,” people are likely to assume either that the problem is too big to be solved or that it’s up to individuals to find their own solutions. To avoid feeding this sense of fatalism, it is critical for communicators to put solutions in the picture.

The values, metaphor, and stories about the lived experience of homelessness recommended open people up to changes to public policy and behavior. To capitalize on their power, communicators must swiftly link them to, and be explicit about, the changes needed to address homelessness.

**Example:** sealing the story using the **Moral Human Rights** frame  
If we want to treat all people with dignity and humanity, we need to make sure everyone can afford a safe and stable home. To do this, we need to create more affordable housing, help people get good, stable jobs so they can pay for housing, and strengthen benefits so we all have the support we need when we face difficult times.

**Example:** sealing the story using the **Constant Pressure** metaphor  
We can reduce the pressure on people’s lives by creating more affordable housing and helping people get good, stable jobs so they can pay for housing. And we can reinforce the dam that protects us from homelessness by strengthening benefits so we all have the support we need when we face difficult times.



## 8. Find different ways to repeat and re-imagine the big idea across all communications including fundraising appeals

Given the UK public’s limited understanding of—and fatalism about—homelessness, it is important to use the full range of opportunities available to tell a different story. Changing attitudes requires repetition. Fundraising appeals are often the most visible and prominent ways that people hear about homelessness and must be part of any strategy to shift thinking about the issue.

Traditional fundraising appeals use depictions of rough sleeping and a dire tone to cultivate a sense of urgency. While this strategy is effective in getting people to give, it reinforces a narrow understanding of the issue and a sense of fatalism, which ultimately reinforces the unproductive thinking that is blocking change and progress on the issue.

Our research suggests that integrating alternative frames into fundraising appeals can shift attitudes and understandings in productive directions without undermining donations.

Using stories of sofa sleeping or unstable housing in fundraising appeals, rather than depictions

of rough sleeping, can help expand people's understanding of homelessness and shift their thinking about solutions. And adopting a more can-do tone can help build a collective belief that change is possible. These adjustments to traditional appeals don't harm financial donations. Fundraising appeals do not have to play into stereotypes and fatalistic thinking to be effective.



## 9. Avoid claims that we are all at risk of homelessness

Communicators should avoid trying to forge connection and concern by claiming that homelessness could happen to any of us. The suggestion that we are all only a few pay days from homelessness does not shift attitudes or policy support. This is likely because it conflicts with people's lived experience of inequality and the recognition that some people aren't at real risk of becoming homeless.

### Building support to end homelessness – what works?

What works	What to watch out for
Use the value of Moral Human Rights to connect and drive policy support	Presenting homeless people as "different" or "other"
Use the value of Interdependence to place the issue of homelessness in a social context	Leading with the economic and financial costs of homelessness
Explain the causes of homelessness by using the Constant Pressure metaphor	Talking about the choices people make which lead to homelessness
Tell a wide range of stories about the different lived experiences of homelessness	Only tapping into people's existing mental picture of homelessness – i.e. rough sleeping
Show people's lives in context, connecting them with how our society functions.	Treating and talking about homeless people as "those" that need help.
Seal the story by directing people to concrete solutions	Telling stories and delivering messages without a clear solution or policy ask.
Find different ways to repeat and re-imagine this 'big idea' across all communications including fundraising appeals	Solely deploying depictions of rough sleeping and a dire tone to cultivate a sense of urgency in fundraising
Focus on the connections between us as human beings and the moral rights we share.	Suggesting that we are all only a few pay days away from homelessness

## About this project

This study is based on research by The FrameWorks Institute with over 10,000 people from across the UK. It builds on research published in 2017 – Finding a Better Frame: How to Create More Effective Messages on Homelessness in the United Kingdom.

### Read the full reports at:

[www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/](http://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/)

### Crisis Head Office

66 Commercial Street  
London E1 6LT  
Tel: 0300 636 1967  
Fax: 0300 636 2012  
[enquiries@crisis.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@crisis.org.uk)  
[www.crisis.org.uk](http://www.crisis.org.uk)  
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