

Moving from Concern to Concrete Change

How to build support for more social housing

A FrameWorks Strategic Memo

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Introduction

The most effective way to build public support for creating more social housing is to frame it as a way of tackling poverty.

The British public is more worried about poverty than they have been in a long time. Even before the pandemic, there was a trend towards increasing support for welfare and benefits and increasing empathy with the circumstances of the low income and unemployed.¹

As the pandemic and economic downturn continue to push more people into hardship, we can channel this awareness and concern into a mandate for more social housing. This memo shows how to do that.

It shows that the public become supportive of major, sustained investment in social housing when they see how social homes can help free people from poverty. It reveals how to make the case for more social housing by doing the following:

- Connecting it with poverty.
- Joining the dots for people, linking the experience of hardship and harm with the high cost and poor quality of housing.
- Explaining how this works.
- Showing how we can solve this with specific policy changes.

This memo outlines how to communicate about social housing to achieve the following:

- Increase positive perceptions of social housing.
- Move social housing up in the public's agenda.
- Boost support for an increase in government funding for social housing.

This memo is based on comprehensive frame testing research carried out by the FrameWorks Institute. It is part of the broader Talking About Housing research project. For more information and to stay up to date, see <https://www.jrf.org.uk/housing/talking-about-housing>.

A fuller description of the methods behind this research is available as a supplement to this memo.

Recommendations

Recommendation #1

Show how social housing tackles poverty and prevents hardship

To make the most powerful case for more social housing, we need to show the public how it helps tackle poverty.

How to do it

Instead of	Try
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Building more social homes will benefit everyone. Social housing will provide a public service for everyone who needs it and will boost our economy by creating jobs, spending and growth in every region. <p>Or</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">– We need to build more social housing as a safety net for the poorest families in our society.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Building more social homes helps tackle poverty. Millions of people are struggling. Given the high cost of housing, we need more social homes to reduce and prevent hardship.

DO: make the case for social housing in terms of addressing poverty and hardship, rather than benefiting our economy and society more broadly.

DO: keep focussed on social housing as a way to prevent poverty for families who are struggling.

DON'T: describe social housing as 'for the poor', 'the poorest' or 'a safety net'. Shift thinking to social housing as a way to prevent poverty for many more people who could benefit from decent, stable, affordable homes.

DON'T: dilute your message by listing the many ways that social housing is a resource that benefits everyone.

Why it works

Poverty matters to people. And by showing how social housing helps address poverty, campaigners make a strong case for public investment. At a time of multiple, competing pressures on public finances, people need to see very clearly why social housing should be prioritised. Tackling poverty makes the strongest case for why we should be investing in social housing.

Talking about how creating social housing can prevent poverty widens the lens from just the lowest income in society to include the many who are struggling.

Recommendation #2

Explain how social housing helps release poverty's grip

Show how poverty traps and restricts people – and how social housing can provide a release. This metaphor helps people see social housing as a structural solution to a structural problem and how high-cost housing and poverty are mutually reinforcing.

How to do it

Instead of	Try
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– High housing costs are leaving many struggling to make ends meet and put food on the table. Millions are having to choose between heating and eating. We need more genuinely affordable social homes to break this damaging cycle.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Social housing can prevent people from becoming trapped in poverty. Right now, the high cost of housing traps millions of people and makes it hard to get out of poverty. Building more social housing would mean that more people could escape the constraints of poverty.

DO: use different words to express the same core idea: Poverty ‘restricts’, ‘constrains’ or ‘traps’ people, and social housing can help ‘release’ or ‘free’ people from its grip.

DO: keep repeating this idea. People need to hear the same idea multiple times for it to stick.

DON'T: mix metaphors in the same piece of communication.

Why it works

When we see problems, we tend to think about individual causes and solutions. We need help to recognise the impact of systems and structures – like the housing market. But terms like ‘structural’ or ‘systemic’ can seem unclear and remote.

The right metaphor can quickly explain complex or nebulous concepts by likening them to something immediately understandable and familiar. Metaphors paint a picture in our heads that guide and shape our thinking and stick with us.

The *restricts and restrains* metaphor, which has been used by poverty campaigners for a number of years, is a powerful tool to explain poverty and its solutions.² This research found that it also increases people’s support for investment in more social housing.

Recommendation #3

Connect the experience of poverty to the quality of housing

Explain how poor-quality housing worsens the experience of poverty – and how social housing is different.

Instead of	Try
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– The chronic shortage of social housing means millions of people are at the mercy of unscrupulous private landlords. Many face appalling living conditions, often at eye-watering prices. This means that they have to cut back on other basic necessities and may go into debt or even become homeless. Our housing system is simply broken.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Our housing system makes poverty worse. Millions are suffering in cramped, damp and mouldy homes rented from private landlords. We need more social homes from housing associations and councils which are better built and maintained. By building more social homes, we can make sure more people have a home that is safe, warm and secure.

DO: focus on the experience of housing and lack of legal protections and regulations in the private rented sector, rather than actions of tenants or the character of private landlords.

DO: balance the problem with the solution, showing the specific advantages that social housing brings.

DON'T: assume people understand all the differences between private and social housing; show how the different systems work and how they can lead to different experiences.

Why it works

Deepening people's understanding of the impact the current system has on people's experiences – and how this could be different – boosts support for change.

This moves people away from blaming individuals for their situations. It positions social housing as an intuitive solution, creating a sense that this is a problem that we can and must fix.

Recommendation #4

Explain how social housing can improve the nation's health and wellbeing

Map the connections between housing and health. This helps people better understand how important housing is for good health, boosting support for investment in social housing.

Instead of	Try
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– The pandemic has laid bare the inequality that was already blighting our nation's health. The housing crisis is a key factor in the state of our nation's health, and millions are feeling the unacceptable impact of that. This is a national disgrace and must be changed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Building new social housing can make the country healthier. When people don't have secure, quality housing that they can afford, it strains their health and wellbeing. The pandemic has made this worse with job and wage losses. But we can change this. Building more quality social homes will improve our nation's physical and mental health. Social rent homes are built to new, higher quality standards. Housing associations or local councils are also much more likely to carry out regular maintenance and repairs to keep the home in good order –protections that aren't available to people renting from private landlords. This means that people will experience less stress and less illness due to damp, cold and unsafe housing.

DO: show how housing and health are connected, by explaining causes and effects as if they are links in a chain.

DO: explain how this works, rather than asserting that the housing system is not working.

DON'T: assume people already know the ways that housing affects health.

Why it works

We're thinking about our nation's health more than ever before. And we recognise that some people are exposed to greater risk of poor health than others. But we don't always see the specific ways that housing matters for health. By bringing these connections to the fore, we can help people see how vital housing is for our health.

Recommendation #5

Embed specific policy solutions in communications about the housing crisis

People are aware that we are facing a housing crisis. They respond to communications that show the urgency of the situation. But concrete policy solutions must feature prominently to channel that concern into support for policy change.

Instead of	Try
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– We're in the middle of a national housing emergency, but barely any new social homes are being built. The chronic shortage of social housing is hurting everyone. We're already seeing a deluge of people facing homelessness – and the recession is set to make this worse. It's not hard to understand: To prevent homelessness, we need to build more homes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– We're facing a national housing emergency, with 8 million people struggling to find safe and secure housing. To prevent more and more people from being trapped in poverty, the government must invest in building 90,000 homes every year for the next 10 years. This needs to start now.

DO: balance the scale of the challenge with specific and suitable solutions.

DO: include specific details, without bombarding audiences with too many numbers.

DON'T: leave people at the crisis: Show it can be fixed, and how.

Why it works

People know there's a housing crisis, so communications highlighting its seriousness ring true. Communications that balance the urgency of the situation with the major policy interventions required to address it are highly effective. They create a sense that change is both necessary and possible, boosting support for change and feelings of collective responsibility.

Endnotes

- 1 National Centre for Social Research, British Social Attitudes survey, October 2020
- 2 O'Neil, M., Hawkins, H., Volmert, A., Kendall-Taylor, N., & Stevens, A. (2018). How to talk about poverty in the United Kingdom: *A FrameWorks MessageMemo*. Washington, D.C.: Frameworks Institute.

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis[®], offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks[®], toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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