



Talking about Homes

Summary

By DHA Communications

In brief – evaluation of phase one of the mobilisation of the Nationwide Foundation and Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s Talking about Homes programme

Overview

The Talking about Homes project is seeking to change the narrative about homes. It is funded by the Nationwide Foundation and Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and delivered in partnership with FrameWorks. Talking about Homes aims to address negative and unhelpful public mindsets about homes and housing by mobilising the use of tested framing recommendations in communications. By using good framing to build better public understanding and conversations about homes and housing solutions, it ultimately seeks to grow support for increased availability of decent and affordable homes.

In 2022 FrameWorks completed a two-year research phase to test which frames would be most productive in shifting mindsets. Talking about Homes then began its mobilisation of the recommended frames, by launching a toolkit on how to talk about homes in 2023. The project has engaged with organisations that talk about the importance of more decent and affordable homes to their audiences.

The Talking about Homes project has worked in depth with a handful of key influential voices that advocate for the availability of more decent and affordable homes. These organisations received tailored support and training on campaigning and communication opportunities and are referred to in this report as ‘depth participants’.

A larger number of organisations engaged at what the project described as ‘breadth’ level. These ‘breadth participants’ took part by accessing the toolkit and other published resources, and by attending open webinars and events. Some of the organisations that showed particular interest were also able to access some elements of the bespoke support.

DHA worked as Talking about Homes’s learning partner for phase 1 of the mobilisation of the project, developing a theory of change and an evaluation framework and programme. As part of this, we wrote a summative report, bringing together the findings from:

- Feedback and management information collected in the project.
- Interviews undertaken with staff at organisations that have participated in the project.
- Learning from analysis of how organisations had used framing in their own communications (analysis was undertaken by Future Narratives Lab and Illume Linguistics).

Our evaluation sought to understand **what good use of frames in communications looks like**, both in terms of framed communications created by project participants, and framing that is evident by those who may have been influenced by this project.

This brief version of the evaluation report highlights our 18 headline findings, key learning points, and our recommendations for the second phase of the project.

18 Headline Findings

Where participants use framing	
1	Organisations that had participated significantly in the project, through bespoke training and support, demonstrate good framing across a wide range of communications formats. Furthermore, they have developed a sense of which framing approaches work well in different formats.
2	There are examples of framing being used in important communication campaigns and moments, including Shelter’s election manifesto, entitled ‘The Way Home: a manifesto to rebuild our broken housing system’ and in the Church of England’s Homes for All campaign narrative: <i>‘These problems are blighting the lives and futures of millions of people, and we all have a moral responsibility to put it right.’ (Church of England, 2024)</i>
3	Project participants know how and where to use the framing recommendations and are comfortable doing so. Interviews with project participants also demonstrated that some have had to work out how to apply framing recommendations in different communications formats. The project has helped some organisations to create consistent messaging across different formats and channels: <i>‘...we’ve tried to use it across website copies, news stories, when we’re talking about new programmes, and [on] social media. We used it in some letters to MPs recently about housing.’ Project participant.</i>

How participants use framing

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Framing recommendations that are used well and widely include using the term ‘homes instead of ‘housing’. Talking about homes as ‘health, not wealth’ was widely and confidently used, for example:

‘A decent, affordable home ... is the foundation of our health, our happiness and our futures.’ (National Housing Federation, 2023).

Participants are also confident in using an explanatory metaphor, including the idea of a good home as a foundation for a good life, including ‘solid base’, ‘cornerstone’, ‘building’ and ‘bedrock’.

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Participants could further develop their practice in using some of the framing recommendations. There are also recommendations which are more suited to particular organisations or voices. For example, the recommendation to place an emphasis on moral responsibility is used by many organisations only in the collective sense (‘we need’ and ‘we must’), and only by some individual voices (e.g. the Archbishop of Canterbury) more fully. Sometimes communications materials employ passive and abstract language, failing to clearly identify who or which organisations should be taking responsibility.

Some participants’ communications apply the recommended critical tone to explain problems and to point to solutions. However, analysis finds that sometimes problems aren’t fully explained and that solutions are either absent, or not set out in sufficient detail. Finally, framing that promotes contextualisation of individual stories (and lived experience), is used well, but not very often.

What helps or hinders participants using framing

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Through this evaluation we wanted to understand what helped or hindered organisations to make good use of the frames, and to normalise this use so that it is sustainable. We found that organisations engaged with framing in a variety of ways. Organisational context is key to the way they engage with, and seek to normalise, framing.

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Smaller, newer organisations, with relatively flat staff hierarchies, engaged well with framing. They are typically progressive in their views and activities, and told us that framing reflects their values and ethos:

‘... the very foundations that we laid in terms of how we talk about what we do, is using this framing...it’s a very natural way for our organisation to talk about things.’ Project Participant.

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For larger, older organisations, those with campaigning and advocacy roles in the homes and housing discourse see framing as very important. In order to share and embed framing across their organisations, they have needed to develop internal champions to engage with framing and support the spread of framing knowledge and practice, particularly where parts of organisations are harder to reach than others:

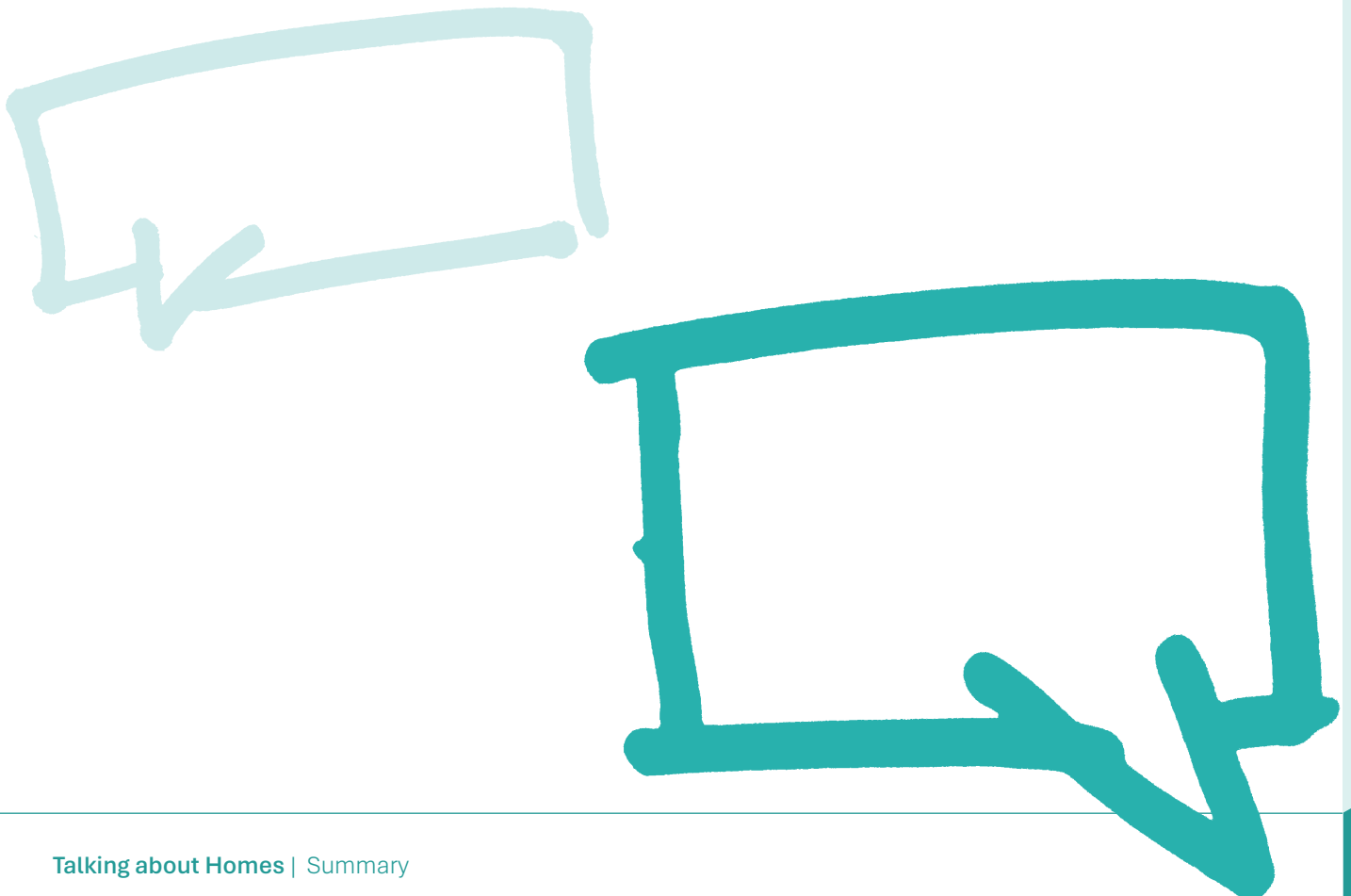
‘I’d rather be a cheerleader than a gatekeeper...I think I’m an active encourager of people adopting it, and an active editor around the organisation, when I can get my hands on things to make sure that’s the way things are [framed].’ Project Participant.

9	There are some parts of larger organisations that have engaged with framing very readily, such as policy teams, whilst there are other areas (e.g. fundraising) where interviewees told us they need to do more work to support their colleagues in using the framing recommendations.
10	People in non-campaigning organisations, such as housing associations and local authorities, use the framing. In some cases, this occurred because an individual staff member has engaged with framing and took it back into their organisation. Even where they had limited influence over the whole organisation, they sometimes occupied positions where they could use that framing knowledge. From the data we have about attendance at webinars and other engagement activities, we can see that there is a wider group of organisations, including local authorities and housing association, that are interested in framing. There are some examples of these organisations attending a webinar, picking up resources like the toolkit and getting on with framing with no further support or intervention.

What participants think about framing

11	Participants see framing as being a robust proposition, because it is underpinned by the FrameWorks research: <i>‘...it’s given us the confidence to know that what we’re doing is useful...Because we’ve actually got an evidence base to know why we shouldn’t be talking about things the way we have been.’ Project Participant.</i>
12	For depth participants, Talking about Homes delivered bespoke and responsive elements, including specific training and workshop opportunities; as well as reviewing communications material or feeding into the strategic development of communications, suggesting how framing has or could be used effectively. These elements have helped organisations to engage, develop their practice and feel supported in their use of framing: <i>‘...the way in which [the project team] explain it all is incredibly helpful, and they are incredibly approachable throughout all of their training, their willingness to support us to use this effectively is really good.’ Project Participant.</i>
13	Talking about Homes has sought to convene organisations, in part to reinforce that narrative change only occurs when it is widely applied by a range of voices. Participants have enjoyed engaging with their peers from other organisations through the project. Activities that focus on tangible policy areas – e.g. workshops on social housing and private renting – and those that offer in-person engagement have been particularly valuable in enabling participants to share their framing challenges and practice.
14	The project has also sought engagement with the wider sector via membership organisations and networks, and this has been a successful route to reaching parts of the sector. Sharing challenges has meant that some participants see framing as a solution that can work collectively for the sector: <i>‘I think the [network] and the [framing] toolkit and the kind of common combination of things available to the sector mean that [the sector is] probably more aligned than...it’s ever been...’</i>

- 15** Participants have also benefited from seeing real examples of framed communications in the public domain; they recognise where other organisations and voices are using the framing, and it makes them feel part of collective endeavour to change the narrative about homes and housing.
- 16** Participants feel framing helps them communicate better. There is some evidence of audiences responding positively to framed material. Framing gives participants confidence that they are addressing key issues of understanding and perception about homes and housing and they feel that this is crucial in order to achieve real change.
- 17** Framing is being applied by individuals and organisations who, we believe, had no direct involvement in the project. For example, the title of the Waltham Forest Council Housing Strategy reflects the framing recommendations, as do speeches by Labour party deputy leader Angela Rayner and leader Sir Keir Starmer, quoted here:
- “My parents’ home gave them security and was a foundation for our family.” (Starmer, 2024)*
- We don’t know how framing has reached these voices. However, we know that the toolkit and resources are accessible, that they are referenced and shared by other voices in the sector, and that organisations and individuals like the Labour party and its senior leadership will have received material from project participants, like Shelter, Crisis and other key voices campaigning for better homes.
- 18** There is significant engagement from different parts of the housing sector in framing, and this suggests the existence of many other organisations and voices who may already be framing, or be interested in framing.



Key learning points

The four key learning points from the evaluation cut across our research questions:

- 1 Organisational circumstances were a key factor in framing practice,** so the level of engagement set against the project's expectations varied for each organisation. On the whole, the project saw more organisations go further than expected; including some organisations that, just by accessing to the toolkit and webinars, were able to frame confidently.
- 2 The partnership between the Nationwide Foundation and Joseph Rowntree Foundation has been very important to the way in which the sector perceives the project.** It has given the project a sense of credibility and robustness, and been seen as a generous and facilitative offer to the sector from two organisations, which are seen as being supportive, rather than competitive, with the rest of the sector.
- 3 There is a shared view in the sector that perceptions of homes and housing held by policymakers, politicians and the public need to be addressed in order for policy and practical change to be achieved.** This has been a motivation for many organisations to use the framing recommendations and engage with the Talking about Homes project. Many organisations believe that there is a growing public consensus that there is a housing crisis, but also that there is no common understanding of the reasons for it, or the potential and best solutions. Framing is seen as one of the tools for addressing this.
- 4 Participants in the project recognise that framing is a practice.** They recognise that they need to work at framing, think about how to embed it within their organisations and refresh their practice. They also understand that framing takes place in a wider context, and that, as policy discourse changes or new issues are introduced, so the framing guidance may need to be extended or practice may need to adapt.

Our work to date covers the first two years of the mobilisation (2023-24), with the project continuing and planned to conclude in 2027. At this stage, we wanted to think about what we have learnt, and what this means for the next phase of the project. We asked participants to tell us what they thought they needed in order to continue framing, and we have looked over the wider learning from the project to identify some key opportunities. We have recommended to Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Nationwide Foundation that the following areas should be key considerations for the next phase.



Recommendations

Things to continue

Training for new staff in relevant organisations, and for those organisations that are new to framing.

Ongoing support and training opportunities to refresh and deepen the practice of staff who have already engaged with the project.

High quality, bespoke support to key organisations so they can capably frame their campaigns and messages.

Light-touch opportunities for practitioners of framing to engage with peers e.g. spaces are facilitated in which organisations feel comfortable to talk about their framing practice and any challenges they face.

Things to extend or refresh

Consider how the project helps to make the case for narrative change, including making it easier for individuals and organisations to make the case for framing to internal and external stakeholders.

Showcasing and celebrating real-life examples of framing as part of the resources.

Expanding the mobilisation of the framing recommendations to explaining key policy areas that intersect with housing and homes, which may attract new relevant audiences.

Things to be further explored

Extend the project's reach amongst stakeholder groups, including local authorities and housing associations.

Intervening where key opportunities in the policy discourse occur to maximise the opportunity to spread and embed framing, e.g. around election periods.

Explore supporting collective cross-organisational voices to frame their shared messages and utilise the project's convening role in these housing ecosystems.

Things for the sector to do

Organisations wanting to become, or remain, capable framers recognise they have an ongoing responsibility to do the internal work of embedding framing.

1.1 Bibliography

Church of England (2024) Archbishop of Canterbury quoted in 'Radical overhaul of housing system...', Church of England.

National Housing Federation (2023). "We know what is needed to reform housing, we need a government bold enough to commit to it. "

Starmer, K. (2024) 'Speech. Quoted in Labour *'to help 80,000 people buy property'....* '. Labour Party