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# Talking about homelessness Framing toolkit



Together  
we will end  
homelessness





# Welcome to the Talking about homelessness Framing toolkit

To end homelessness for good, a powerful new story must replace old notions of poor choices and inevitability. Working together, we can tell a new story about homelessness in the United Kingdom. One that builds public understanding and support for change. One that drives political will for action.

Together with the Framework's Institute, we're using framing to tell this new story about homelessness. Based on research with more than 10,000 people in the UK, this toolkit explains what framing homelessness is, why it matters, and how you can put framing tools and techniques into practice yourself.

If we work together across the homelessness sector, repeating and expanding this new story in our communications, we stand a much better chance of changing hearts and minds.

Here's how.

## What is framing?

Framing means using evidence to make **deliberate choices** in the words and images we use to tell our stories about homelessness.

Choices about:

- what to emphasise
- what to explain
- what to leave unsaid

And for our audience, these choices can lead to radically different ways of thinking.



## Why do we need to frame homelessness?

We need to tell a new story about homelessness so that we can build public and political will to end it.

We're up against certain assumptions that make it harder for people to understand what needs to change.

**Mental shortcuts** like:

- **Self-makingness:** homelessness happens because individuals make bad choices
- **Othering:** homelessness affects other people, not people like me. Middle-aged men, young runaways, and abused women

- **Homelessness = rough sleeping:** the most visible form of homelessness is the only form

- **Prevention is missing:** homelessness can't be prevented, people can only be helped at crisis point, through hostels and hot meals

- **Fatalism:** the system is rigged, or governments are failing. It will never change; it's just how things are

Together, these lead people to blame individuals for their circumstances. To see only individual-level solutions. And to deny the possibility of wider, systemic change to end homelessness.

## How can we frame homelessness?

We can dislodge people's mental shortcuts on homelessness with a story framed to highlight **our shared experience**.

This means we:

- Emphasise our **fundamental commonality**
- Show the **varied lived experience** of homelessness
- Focus on the **role of systems**

## Use values to show why ending homelessness matters

We can use values frames to state **powerful, unarguable truths** about our world. To remind people that we all care about ending homelessness - without lecturing, othering or talking down.

When we frame homelessness as an issue that matters to all of us, we prime our audience to see how they have a role in creating change.

Use **moral human rights** to emphasise our shared humanity.

Like this:

**"Everyone has the right** to be treated with **dignity**. Living with dignity means having access to **decent** housing. Let's commit to protecting this **essential human need**. Right now, hundreds of thousands of people in our country are homeless – forced to sleep on friends' sofas and floors, live in crowded or unsafe places, sleep on buses or in cars or even stay out on the streets. **We can do better.**"

To use this values frame:

- Call to mind our shared moral status
- Remind people of what it means to live with dignity
- Emphasise the human needs we have in common

- Talk about moral rights and imperatives - not legal ones

**Try these words and phrases, and come up with your own:**

**Everyone has the right to a safe and stable home**

**We should treat people like human beings**

**No-one should be forced to live like this**

**Everybody has a right to be treated with dignity**

**As human beings, we all need a home to build a life and thrive**

**Denying people access to housing is simply inhumane**

**No-one should be forced to...**

**It's not right that**

**This is inhumane and wrong**

**We can do better than this**

**We can all see the human cost of homelessness**

**Decent housing is a basic human need**





A simple edit to put 'moral human rights' into practice:



And here is another example in practice:

Crisis used moral human rights to frame its response to homelessness death statistics. Framing with a moral human values frame helps dislodge the idea that homelessness affects 'other' people, and drives connection and collective responsibility for action.

## Crisis responds to the deaths of homeless people in England and Wales in 2018

01.10.2019

Today, the ONS has reported that 726 people died while homeless in England and Wales during 2018, a rise of 51% since ONS began recording this data.

Responding to the figures **Jon Sparkes, Crisis Chief Executive, said:** "It is heart-breaking that hundreds of people were forced to spend the last days of their lives without the dignity of a secure home. This is now the second year running where we have known the true scale of the human cost of homelessness, yet still the lessons from these tragic deaths go unlearnt."

"Behind these statistics are human beings, who like all of us had talents and ambitions. They shouldn't be dying unnoticed and unaccounted for. It's crucial that Governments urgently expand the safeguarding system used to investigate the deaths of vulnerable adults to include everyone who has died while street homeless, so we can help prevent more people from dying needlessly. Because in this day and age there is no excuse for anyone dying without a safe place to call home."



Use **interdependence** to remind people of the connections between us all.

Like this:

**“What affects one of us affects all of us. When some people are struggling, it hurts everyone. Right now, many people are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless - which makes it much harder for people to contribute to and share in our country’s prosperity. Making sure that everyone has safe, stable housing benefits us all, creating a stronger, more productive society where everyone can play their part”**

To use this values frame:

- Evoke the day-to-day, real- life interactions with other people that form the basis of our society
- Highlight common social ties, contribution and benefits
- Remind people that we all benefit when our society is stronger - and vice versa

**Try these words and phrases, and come up with your own:**

**Homelessness hurts us all**

**If we work together, we can...**

**Making sure everyone has safe and stable home benefits us all**

**In society, our lives are connected, we all depend on others for help and support**

**Homelessness takes a heavy toll on our communities**

**We can decide as a society to...**



**This is our collective responsibility**

**Our society is stronger when everyone has a place within it**

**Our support systems should work for and include everyone in our society**

**We’ve failed as a society when some of us are struggling**

**We all depend on public services for support**

**We/ us/ our/ everyone/ all**



A simple edit to put 'interdependence' into practice:



**We can also make simple changes to avoid 'othering':**

Avoid	Embrace
The homeless/homeless people	People facing/ experiencing homelessness
Rough sleepers	People rough sleeping
The vulnerable	People more exposed to/ at higher risk of...
Them	People



## Use metaphor to explain how poverty and homelessness work

We can use metaphor to explain why homelessness happens in systemic, straightforward, and concrete terms.

Use **constant pressure** to explain how people can be pushed into homelessness.

Like this:

"Poverty **puts pressure** on people - it's constant and strong. If the **pressure builds up**, people can be **pushed** into homelessness. We can **relieve the pressure** on people's lives by creating affordable housing and helping people get good, stable jobs. And we can help people **withstand this pressure** by strengthening our social welfare system."

To use this metaphor:

Call to mind an external force that -

- Is constant
- Is cumulative, building up over time
- Could be lessened upstream or further down, with the right support

Get creative and think about different **forms of pressure** and different ways you could express it to help people visualise and feel what it's like to be forced into homelessness.

**Felt suffocated**

**Carrying a heavy load on your shoulders**

**Like a pressure cooker**

**A pressure gauge on red**

**A tension headache**

**Pushed to the edge**

**Squeezed by a vice**

**The walls closing in**



Try these words and phrases,  
and come up with your own:

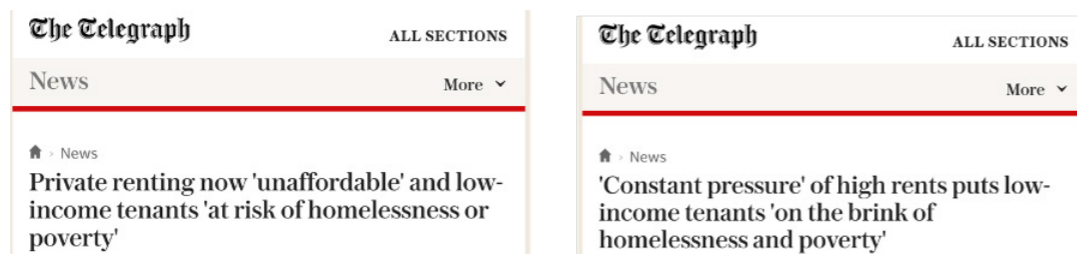
People in poverty are pushed to the  
brink by high rents and low wages

The pressures of hostel life built up

A sudden increase in pressure – like losing  
work – can force people into homelessness

Government can release  
the pressure by...

Let's give people the  
breathing room they need



Use **restricts and restrains** to show  
how poverty makes it harder to avoid  
being pushed into homelessness.

Like this:

"Our economy is **locking** people in poverty. Low paid, unstable jobs mean more and more families can't put food on the table or afford rising rents. With the economy driving up the cost of living, many are **caught in a daily struggle** to make ends meet, unable to think about a different future. Truly affordable housing is essential for breaking poverty's grip."

To use this metaphor:

Call to mind an external force that -

- Acts on people in ways we can't control
- Limits our options and opportunities
- We could be set free from with the right support

Think about **different forms of constraint** and different ways you could express it:

Feeling held down

Locked in

Hands tied  
behind your back

In the grip of...

Feeling trapped by

Try these words and phrases,  
and come up with your own:

Our economy locks  
people in poverty

Benefits help release  
people from constraints  
and open options

Too many people are  
trapped in this system



## Tell a wider range of stories to expand people's understanding of homelessness

We can expand the definition of homelessness by telling different kinds of stories from lived experience. Stories about sofa-surfing, living in cars, insecure housing - and not just rough sleeping.

Like this:

"Scott had high rent and a low-paying, zero-hours contract job. When he got ill, 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 at risk of homelessness. There are people like Scott all over the country right now who need our help."

Here's what this looks like in practice:

Ashley's story. 'Homeless people have become commodities now.'



'Luckily, I've still got my HGV license and have finally managed to find a driving job, so now I can get out of the system, but being here you start to realise that bridge just doesn't exist for most people. I wouldn't be able to afford my own place without a permanent job. Housing

Thomas & Ruth. Searching for safety with no local connection.



'We stayed in a couple of B&B's when we first got here while we tried to register for housing benefit, but that was two months ago now, and we've just been bounced us from one place to another ever since. Basically, because we've got

Adam's story. Working full time and still homeless.



'I stayed on a friend's sofa at first, but you quickly end up feeling like a burden to people. I didn't want to overstay my welcome, and I still had that bit of pride that I could do things on my own, so I moved into a B&B, just so I had a roof over my head. The B&B was ok, but I was



## Place individual stories in context to show systems at work

We can add **context** to individual stories to show how systems can help or harm. To make sure that our stories aren't dismissed as exceptional, or the result of an individual's poor choices. And to explain why ending homelessness requires us to **fix systems and conditions - not people**.

Like this:

"Like many single mums I could only work part-time, when my daughter was at school. The cost of childcare keeps rising - there's no way I could afford it on my salary. Then my daughter got sick. I needed to stay home to look after her, and my boss was no help. She fired me. With last year's rent increase, my finances were already on the brink as it was. Expenses and stresses and bills just built up and up. We should have had more support from the benefits system - but with the switch to Universal Credit, there's a five week delay until your first payment. Everyone is struggling here."

A few phrases that bring in context:

Like a lot of [working parents / people with health problems / etc], I...	This support system should be for everyone who needs it.
So many people are affected by this.	[Problem] is widespread.
...cut down on my options...	...restricted my options...
I had support from [X].	Not everyone has access to this support.
The benefits system should have been there to...	This affects/affected more than just me.
My options were taken away / given back when...	I didn't have any options.
In my community...	In [place], everyone is struggling to make ends meet.



## Tips for bringing context into interviews:

If you are interviewing someone about their experience of homelessness, try using questions like these draw out the circumstances, external factors, and structures and systems at play into the story:

### Exploring circumstances and the factors leading to homelessness

What was going on in your daily life at the time?

What challenges were you facing? What pressures did you feel you were under at the time?

What options did you feel were open to you? Or closed to you at the time?

What support did you have around you in this situation?

If you didn't have support, what support did you need or do you think would have helped at the time?

Did you try and get help from anyone? (For example, your local council, healthcare). What happened?

Have you experienced the 'x' system? (for example benefits, housing system) What was your experience like?

You managed to achieve 'x' (for example, complete training/ work or find temporary accommodation), what support helped you at the time?

You managed to achieve 'x', what were you up against/ what things do you feel were working against you at the time? How did it feel having these pushing against you?

### Experience of homelessness

What do you want people to know about homelessness?

Does this affect other people you know? Do you think it is widespread? Why do you think that is?

How does it affect people you know?

Some people tell us this feels like being under constant pressure. What do you think about that?

What support do you think people should have to help them?

What do you think needs to change to prevent this happening to people?

What do you think needs to happen to end homelessness?

There is some research which tells us that most people think we have a moral right to have a safe home. What do you think about that?

Have you ever thought about having a safe home as a moral human right?

## Help people see what your facts and stats mean

Stats don't speak for themselves. We can help people make sense of facts and figures by putting them in context; with values, metaphor and systems stories.

Like this:

"If we want to **treat all people with dignity and humanity**, we need to make sure everyone can afford a safe and stable home. And yet more than 170,000 families and individuals are homeless in Britain today - a wrong that must be put right. We need to create **more affordable housing**, help people get **good, stable jobs** to pay for this housing, and **strengthen the social welfare system** so we all **have the support we need to face tough times.**"

## Combat fatalism with concrete, proportionate solutions

Homelessness can seem like a problem too big to be solved. We can combat fatalism by talking about the things we can do to end homelessness - and explaining how these solutions work.

Like this:

With constant pressure and moral human rights –

"The way our **immigration system is designed** can have the unintended and inhumane consequence of **pushing** people into homelessness, and blocking efforts to resolve homelessness when it happens. We can **redesign the immigration and welfare systems** to **treat everyone like a human being** and provide access to support with housing when people are in need."

## What works, and what to watch out for

Certain words and ideas work better than others when talking about homelessness. We need to keep using these words and ideas to tell our stories - and avoid the ones that cause harm.

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



## Framing checklist

Look at your work through a framing lens. When you start on a piece of communications, ask yourself these checklist questions to plan and check your work:

- What are the harmful mental shortcuts I want to avoid?
- What is missing from public thinking that I need to bring through?
- Which values frame will I use up front to say why this is important?
- How can I use the pressure metaphor to explain what's going on and bring solutions into the picture?
- How can I make sure systems and structures play an active part in this story, as both causes and solutions?

## More help and support

Thank you for taking the time to work through this toolkit.

If you want more help and support to use framing, get in touch Catherine Ashford (Strategic Communications Project Manager) at [catherine.ashford@crisis.org.uk](mailto:catherine.ashford@crisis.org.uk).

Full research reports are on the Crisis website:

**[Finding a better frame \(2017\)](#)**

**[Reframing homelessness in the UK \(2018\)](#)**

**[Our Common Experience: research summary \(2018\)](#)**

**[Framing homelessness during coronavirus \(2020\)](#)**





