

# How to build lasting support to solve UK poverty

This is a summary of a two-year investigation by the FrameWorks Institute, exploring public attitudes towards poverty in the UK. It recommends a set of tested strategies to build a deeper understanding of how poverty happens and the changes needed to address it.

---

## What works?

Public opinion matters. With poverty on the rise in the UK for the first time in two decades, it's time for communicators, campaigners and experts to change the public's hearts and minds. This can be done.

We can help people see that poverty exists and understand its impact. We can build support for a robust welfare system. We can inspire widespread belief that change is possible and that poverty can be solved. And we can mobilise action to do so.

We can do this by telling a new story that:

- **starts with poverty**, not politics or ideology
- **says why tackling poverty matters** by relating to shared values of compassion and justice
- **is brought to life by messengers** who embody these values
- **explains** how the economy locks people in poverty
- **explains** how poverty can be solved by positioning:
  - **the economy as a designed system**; one that we can redesign
  - **benefits** as helping to loosen poverty's grip
- **uses examples**, rather than statistics, to show that poverty exists and to demonstrate its characteristics and impacts
- **shows** how we rely on public systems, painting a clear picture of what they look like
- **counters fatalism** with clear solutions that make a tangible difference.

### The research

By a team at the FrameWorks Institute

JANUARY 2018

# Background

People tend to switch off when they hear facts or vivid stories about poverty. They make us uncomfortable and prompt our brains to explain away our discomfort without even realising we're doing it. Psychologists call this motivated reasoning – it's like an immune system for our views and identities that helps us fend off ideas that challenge us.

Divisive cultural and political narratives add to this challenge by creating a tough backdrop for poverty messages – as a result those messages get lost in translation.

By carefully *framing* messages, campaigners and experts can be heard and understood.

---

This report provides the building blocks for a new poverty narrative. 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

1. Be clear about what you want to communicate and your intended impact.
2. Know what you're up against – and the opportunities available – by understanding how people think and feel.
3. Make deliberate choices about how information is presented: what to emphasise, what to explain and what to leave unsaid.
4. Trigger certain ways of thinking and bypass others – it's very hard to argue against a feeling or belief once it's activated.
5. 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.
6. Show that change is possible, not that problems are unsolvable.
7. Equip your audience to think differently – don't meet them where they are.

## Key recommendations and examples

### 1. Understand public thinking to change it

Three patterns of thinking dominate how the British public sees poverty and the prospect of change.

Common beliefs among British public	What it means for communicating poverty
'Post-poverty' – UK society is prosperous and has progressed beyond poverty.	People dismiss poverty's existence. Facts and stories have little impact. They don't fit with this view and simply bounce off people.
'Self-makingness' – an individual's situation is the sole result of his or her motivation and choices.	When triggered, this line of thinking makes 'try harder' and 'work more' the only sensible solutions. People can't see the ways that contexts shape lives.
'The game is rigged' – we are all at the mercy of elites who manipulate the system to keep others down for their own gain.	This fatalistic way of thinking prompts people to disengage altogether because they believe nothing can or will ever change.

The combined effect is that poverty is either dismissed out of hand or viewed as inherent to human existence and impossible to change.

This makes many seemingly sensible poverty messages backfire. Inadvertently activating these ways of thinking makes people *more likely* to blame individuals for being in poverty, *less concerned* with the issue, and *less supportive* of change.

### 2. Show why poverty matters

It is common for people in the UK to think of 'real' poverty as a thing of the past or a problem elsewhere in the world.

When we talk about poverty by appealing to deeply held values of compassion and justice, we bypass this pattern of thinking. This is far more effective than arguing against the belief that poverty no longer exists – or trying to disprove it with statistics.

Making a moral case for poverty is the most effective way of framing this issue for a broad audience. But this doesn't mean asserting moral superiority, claiming the moral high ground, or highlighting the moral failures of others. It does mean calling to mind the moral values that we all share and hold dear.

Emphasising our society's moral compassion works well for people across the political spectrum. Adding in a sense of justice and opportunity works particularly well to create a different understanding of poverty among people with more conservative views.

#### Before

"We may think of poverty as something from the industrial past, or a problem that exists in third world countries, but it's happening right here and right now in the UK."

#### After

"In our society, we believe in showing compassion towards others, and helping and protecting each other from harm. Yet, right now, many live in poverty. We share a moral responsibility to ensure that everyone in our country has a decent standard of living."

#### After

"As a society, we believe in justice and compassion. But, right now, millions of people in our country are living in poverty. We share a moral responsibility to make sure that everyone in our country has a decent standard of living and the same chances in life, no matter who they are or where they come from."

Messengers and spokespeople who align with these values can help bring them to life and build public will.

### 3. Address poverty head on

When well-framed, the issue of poverty is recognised as a pressing social problem that fosters a sense of collective responsibility.

Leading with benefits turns people off and prompts them to shut out your message. Without careful framing, benefits are a mental short cut to blame and disdain. They invite people to examine whether individuals deserve society's support rather than the flaws in the system. Benefits must be the solution to a larger issue, not the problem to solve.

#### Before

"Our benefits system is failing our society's most vulnerable people and many are experiencing extreme hardship as a result. With poverty rising we need a benefits system that is fit for purpose."

#### After

"Poverty is increasing for the first time in two decades. More and more people are struggling to get by. We need to put this right so that everyone has a decent standard of living."

### 4. Tone down the politics

While poverty is a political issue, leading with or stressing its political dimensions often puts people off and makes them shut out your message. Words that are associated with a political ideology can prevent people from hearing you and seeing what you're saying.

Research shows that we can change hearts and minds among people of all political persuasions – but that we must steer clear of overtly politicised language if we hope to do so.

#### Before

"Cuts in the name of austerity are ravishing communities and leaving thousands of people destitute. Instead of endlessly debating the issue, the Government must act now to empower people by investing in our welfare state."

#### After

"It is simply not right that we live in a society where so many are locked in poverty. We must all get behind the changes that can solve poverty."

### 5. Explain how the economy locks people in poverty

Communications that explain how something works are powerful – they create a stronger and longer-lasting impression than those that simply describe a situation. By changing how people understand poverty and giving them a memorable mental picture, we move public thinking and create more fertile ground for new policies and solutions.

Using a **'Restricts and restrains'** metaphor helps overcome deeply held resistance to recognising that poverty exists, and boosts willingness to tackle it. It helps people to see that poverty stops people from choosing their own path in life, building recognition that everyone should have control over their lives.

Communicators can use this metaphor flexibly with different words and images, more or less emphasis and emotion, depending on the communication's purpose and audience.

#### Example 1

"Our economy is locking people in poverty. Low-paid, unstable jobs mean more and more families can't put food on the table. The way our economy is working is leading to rising living costs and many are locked in a daily struggle to make ends meet, unable to think about a different future. It is hard to break free from the restrictions our economy places on people."

#### Example 2

"Poverty restricts the choices people can make, leaving them in impossible situations like choosing either to heat their home or pay their rent. With rising living costs and unstable work, our economy is holding people down and stopping many from choosing their own path."

A second metaphor that helps people to see how poverty works is **'Currents.'** It enables people to see how poverty reduces choices and makes it extremely hard for people to simply change their situations.

## Example

“Our economy creates powerful currents that can pull people into poverty, like low wages or increasing living costs. And sometimes things happen that threaten to pull us under, like losing a job, coping with a disability, or leaving our home to get out of an abusive relationship.”

Communicators can use either metaphor to powerful effect when talking about poverty.

## 6. Talk about how benefits loosen poverty’s grip

When we talk about how benefits release and loosen poverty’s grip, we see greater support for increasing benefits and creating a more robust support system. Make benefits part of the solution, not the problem to be addressed.

### Before

“The benefit system is broken and must be fixed. Benefits are vital for people in poverty – including those who work. We need to stop cutting benefits so the system is fit for purpose.”

### After

“We can solve poverty by loosening its grip on people. Benefits help release people from the restrictions our economy places on them, such as low pay and high housing costs.”

It is also important that communications remind people of the public services we all rely on day-to-day. This means drawing attention to the public systems that are part of the fabric of everyday life for us all. It also means showing how vital they are for people who are struggling.

### Before

“The rise in poverty shows that our safety net is failing. Instead of helping people get by, our public systems and services are keeping people down.”

### After

“All of us rely on publicly funded services and support systems like education, roads, railways and the NHS. And our public services are especially important to people who are struggling, such as our welfare system. We need to strengthen these supports to solve poverty and make sure everyone has a decent life.”

## 7. Explain how the economy can be redesigned

The economy is seen as big, complicated and unmovable. It’s viewed as a natural part of our lives – it’s just the way it is and just does what it does.

To avoid triggering this fatalism and instead instil a powerful sense of pragmatism, we can talk about the economy as a designed system – one that we can redesign.

## Example

“The economy we have today was designed – it is the result of a set of decisions that were made about our society’s priorities and resources. Just as it was designed, we can redesign it so that it works for everyone.”

## 8. Help people see what your facts and stories mean

For poverty campaigners, it often feels as if statistics and heart-breaking stories speak for themselves. This is very often not the case. As communicators, it’s our job to help people make meaning of statistics and see the bigger picture that a story points to.

Stories about people’s struggles can be powerful. But resonating with the public is not enough. We need to build a better understanding of poverty’s causes and help people connect with solutions – not just describe the trials people face and conquer through their own personal strength.

When people hear statistics and facts about poverty they often need help knowing what they mean. By connecting numbers to values of justice and compassion and explaining the way the economy restrains people, we help steer people towards, not away from, the changes needed to tackle poverty.

Talking about rising foodbank use and insecure housing as evidence of poverty’s existence can have a powerful impact on public attitudes. It’s important that these illustrations are connected to our wider poverty narrative, not presented as standalone issues.

## Before

“Hundreds of thousands of children and older people have been plunged into poverty in the past four years. 14 million people now live in poverty in the UK – over a fifth of the population.”

## After

“In our society we believe in justice and compassion. It is not right that a fifth of our population live in poverty and that more and more people are relying on foodbanks. We need to redesign the way our economy works to free people from the grip of poverty.”

## Building support to solve poverty – what works?

What works?	Watch out for
Leading with shared values of compassion and justice.	Leading with the economic benefits of reducing poverty.
Choosing messengers who embody these values.	Overtly politicised language.
Showing how the economy restricts people’s choices and can lead to poverty.	Focusing on describing the problem and its prevalence and missing out the explanation of how it works.
Leading with poverty.	Opening with benefits as the issue.
Highlighting how we all rely on public services day-to-day – especially those who are struggling.	Unintentionally leading people to condemn public services at a general level.
Showing the real causes and systemic solutions when telling a person’s story.	Heartfelt individual stories that don’t show the wider context, why this is happening and how it can be fixed, or stories that narrowly frame the causes and solutions to poverty at an individual level.
Enabling people to see that changes to systems are possible by talking about redesigning our economy.	Talking about the economy or system without explaining how it works and can be redesigned.
Using shared values and metaphors to frame facts and statistics.	Naked numbers: facts that don’t help people to know what the numbers are saying and understand the context.
Connecting illustrations of poverty with this narrative and poverty’s wider causes and solutions.	Presenting poverty’s impacts as standalone issues.

## About the project

This study is based on social science research with over 20,000 members of the British public and builds on 2016’s [Talking About Poverty](#).

## For further information

The FrameWorks Institute will be publishing the full report on their website: <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/>  
For more JRF publications and blogs on this subject, go to <https://www.jrf.org.uk/our-work/talking-about-poverty>

Read more summaries at [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)  
Other formats available  
ISBN 978-1-911581-28-4

Joseph Rowntree Foundation  
The Homestead  
40 Water End  
York YO30 6WP  
Tel: 01904 615905

email: [info@jrf.org.uk](mailto:info@jrf.org.uk)  
[www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)  
Ref: 3283