How people think about homes has changed: here's what this means for communicators

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Introduction

The Talking about Homes project, a partnership between FrameWorks UK, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Nationwide Foundation, aims to shift how people think about homes, and build support for changes to our housing system. We've been working with partners across the housing sector to use evidence-based framing strategies to tell a new story about homes in the UK.

These strategies were identified through FrameWorks' framing and mindsets research. Before we can make choices about how to frame an issue, we need to first understand the cultural mindsets that shape people's thinking – the deep patterns of thinking that sit below the level of opinion or talk. This allows us to identify which mindsets could helpfully be brought to the fore, and which mindsets to background, using framing.

Mindsets are enduring, but they can move – often in moments of social upheaval, or in response to sustained social change efforts.

Talking about Homes has made a significant impact on how organisations and key voices in the housing sector communicate about homes. Since 2020, when the research was undertaken, we've also lived through culture-shaping events, such as a change of government, the Covid pandemic, and failures in our housing system laid bare by the Grenfell Tower Inquiry and the coroner's ruling on the death of Awaab Ishak.

In this context, we wondered, have mindsets on homes shifted? Identifying where and how mindsets are moving can uncover new opportunities for real world change. Tracking mindsets also helps us to measure the impact of social (or narrative) change efforts.

A series of focus groups[i] carried out in 2024 as part of FrameWorks UK's Moving Mindsets programme generated insight into people's thinking about homes that we can compare with how people thought about housing in our 2020 research.

This briefing sets out three takeaways about how mindsets on homes have shifted over this four-year period, and what they mean for communicators.

1) From homes as a basic need for individuals, to homes as a fundamental need for society

In our 2020 research, one of the dominant mindsets people drew on to think about homes was ***shelter = basic need***: the idea that we all need a roof over our head because shelter is one of humanity's basic needs.

> *"Having **a roof over your head** is just one of those **basic necessities** in life."*
>
> – Participant, 2020

In combination with ***government responsibility***, people reasoned that the government should do more to provide this shelter to people who don't have it. But this reasoning was limited. People tended to think of any government support with housing as a temporary

stop-gap to help individuals who are most in need – and not on an ongoing basis. This included seeing social homes as a *temporary* support for people in need.

Our 2024 research pointed to a shift in how people are applying this mindset. In the majority of sessions, participants understood that housing is important, not only because it provides shelter for individuals, but also because there is a wider societal benefit when everyone has a place to live. People reasoned that housing is not only a basic need for individuals, but a *fundamental* need for us as a society.

> *"I think [politicians] need to **fix the basics, which is housing and taxes**, and I think from there we'll see what happens. But **got to start somewhere**."*
>
> – Participant, 2024

When asked to reflect on what it means for the UK to do well, and what it would take for the UK to do better, housing was top of mind. Participants spoke about 'fixing' housing – making it easier for people to afford a decent place to live – as a foundational step in improving how the UK is doing. This thinking was not only applied to making it easier for people to buy homes, but also to improving renting and social homes.

This shift to a broader view of why homes are important for society creates an opening for communicators to strengthen the case for solutions such as building more social homes – positioning such solutions as investments in our whole society. We can build on the idea that a home is more than a need for individuals, it is a building block for our society – so we all have a stake in making sure everyone has a decent home.

What this means for communicators

1. **Spark and reinforce the idea that** when people have a decent home they can afford, this isn't just good for individuals, **it's good for our whole society**.
2. **Consider extending the 'foundations' metaphor**: home is the foundation for our lives. Use this not only to communicate that our homes are the foundations of our lives as individuals, but that housing is fundamental to our society.
3. **Keep building the understanding that the quality of homes matters** – and avoid triggering the idea of 'basic shelter'.

Example:

Instead of...	"We need to build at least 90,000 social homes per year to ensure everyone has a roof over their head. When people have a decent, affordable home, it's a firm foundation for every aspect of their life."
Try...	"Building at least 90,000 social homes per year would strengthen the foundations of our society. When we have a decent, affordable place to call home – it supports every aspect of our lives."

Why?	While both examples use the 'foundations' metaphor effectively, the second is an example of how we can use the metaphor to tap into the idea that there are benefits to our whole society. The second example avoids using the term 'roof over their head' as this risks triggering the idea of a basic shelter.

2) From landlords as responsible for upkeep, to landlords as accountable for decent standards

Our 2020 research revealed the mindset ***owner responsible for upkeep***: the assumption that most housing is (and should be) privately owned, and therefore responsibility for the quality of housing – including its general upkeep – is for private owners.

One of the implications of this mindset was that people tended to see renting as easier than owning, as it was deemed to be 'less responsibility', with landlords responsible for sorting out any issues and maintenance. As a result, people spoke about renting as a 'stress-free' experience.

> *"If anything goes wrong, rental people can just call up their landlord,* ***and it will be done for them****."*
>
> – Participant, 2020

The 2024 research points to this thinking being applied in a new way. While the owner is still considered responsible for maintaining the quality of a home, participants recognised that this does not always happen. In focus groups, discussions about how housing relates to health often sparked assertions from participants that, too often, homes are not properly maintained. And participants drew on anecdotes to empathise with how difficult it can be for tenants when homes are not maintained to a decent standard.

With this understanding comes a desire for both private and social landlords to be held accountable.

> *Participant 1: "I think if they bring back more council houses,* ***they need something more regulated****... they* ***hopefully would keep maintenance, and therefore you wouldn't get the damp*** *and all those sort of things, and therefore the house will be better."*
>
> *Participant 2: "I was going to say exactly that. Took the words out of my mouth."*
>
> – 2024

We also saw more of a critique of landlords motivated by profit – to the extent that they prioritise profit over their tenants' needs. And people reasoned about this in more systemic ways than we saw in our original research.

2020 research found the ***mean vs caring landlord*** mindset, which led people to view the actions of landlords through an individualistic lens. People assumed that housing inequality was shaped by the behaviour of individual landlords; some landlords care for their properties and provide quality housing, while others do not. Focusing on the whims of an individual landlord can get in the way of building support for systemic change in the way

the housing system is regulated. Additionally, reasoning that individual tenants are responsible for finding "good" landlords is a barrier to thinking about the issues that make it difficult for people to find decent and affordable housing in the private rented sector.

Participants in 2024 focus groups expressed more of a critique of a system which is allowing landlords to be motivated by profit – often to the detriment of their tenants.

> *"... **the system is so skewed to the person renting out that house**, and you have to fill out forms and give so much away, so much of your personal information away, and you find out nothing about your landlord. And generally I've had one really good landlord. **The rest of them have honestly all been only after money and nothing else."***
>
> – Participant, 2024

The problem is no longer written off as a few rogue 'mean' landlords – but instead seen as a design flaw in the housing system which needs to be fixed. Drawing on ***government responsibility***, participants reasoned that regulation is the logical solution to ensure the system holds landlords to account. This is good news for advocates campaigning for such changes – it suggests that campaigning efforts have filtered through to public understanding.

It also presents a broader opportunity. We know from our 2020 research that people tend to think of the housing system through a naturalistic lens – with an assumption that the housing market is shaped by forces outside of and beyond human control. This thinking gets in the way of recognising the human-designed and led systems that have created and shape the housing system. Additionally, this thinking can lead to a sense of ***fatalism*** – that nothing can be done to change the system since it's seen to work beyond human control. But people's recognition of the need for regulation suggests an opportunity to build further understanding of how our housing system can and should be redesigned to work better.

What this means for communicators

1. **Show what isn't working in our housing system** – and set the expectation that it can and should be designed to ensure we all have a decent and affordable home.
2. **Spell out what regulations are needed**, how they would help, and who they would hold to account.
3. Present particular regulations and changes as **examples of how our housing system can be redesigned to work better.**

Example:

"It isn't right that so many renters have been living with problems like damp and mould, which their landlords have been slow to deal with – prolonging stress and harm to their physical health. That's why the Renters' Rights Act will order landlords to take swift action to fix problems like damp, mould and structural issues. It's a positive step towards a housing system that puts people's health first."

3) Greater appreciation that 'just working harder' is not enough

Our 2020 research revealed a dominant mindset of ***individualism***. This is the idea that our outcomes in life are the result of our choices and willpower. In the case of housing, people reasoned that making good choices and working hard determine whether people live in – and own – a decent home.

> *"**You have to work hard**... they work hard, they've got aspirations, they want something out of life.... Then people are more likely to own [a home]."*
>
> – Participant, 2020

Our 2024 research revealed a shift away from the dominance of ***individualism***. Participants in all sessions expressed greater understanding of the constraints which make it hard to afford a decent home. In particular, people recognised the increased cost of living and how housing costs have risen disproportionately to wages. People were quick to share their concerns that it is harder than ever to buy a home, that renting is getting more and more expensive, and that this is a national trend.

> *"It's not just the idea of not being able to buy your own home. It's being completely out of even the rental market... to think that **two thirds of your wage can go on your rent, and then you have absolutely zero control over that**, and that you can't build for a future."*
>
> – Participant, 2024

This understanding that individual work ethic and willpower only goes so far – that people cannot simply *try* their way to better housing – is welcome. However, this greater recognition of the barriers people face comes with a challenge too. ***Fatalism***, the assumption that the problems with our housing system are too big and too complex to solve, dominated our 2024 research sessions.

Fatalism normalises the idea that taking action is pointless and makes it much harder for people to recognise that solutions exist, or that they could make a meaningful difference. This makes it easier for people to dismiss solutions such as housing policies as unworkable or as action that won't be followed through. So, while a greater understanding of the barriers to living in a decent, affordable home is an important shift in people's thinking, it's essential to build the understanding that these barriers are not insurmountable. If this gap in understanding is not addressed, it will be filled in by ***fatalism***.

This shift away from the assumption that 'people just need to work harder' is the first step, but we need to move people towards the understanding that 'the system *can* work better'. In doing so, we can build people's sense of efficacy – the belief that problems can and will be solved – and counter ***fatalism***.

What this means for communicators

1. **Show that it is possible to improve our housing system.** Be explicit and talk about solutions at least as much as problems.
2. Break down problems in the housing system into measurable steps and **provide solutions that match the scale of the problems.**
3. **Talk about progress that is already being made** to improve our housing system, and what needs to happen next.

Example:

Instead of...	"For decades, not enough social homes were built, and too many were lost via the Right to Buy scheme. Putting this right requires ambitious and long-term action."
Try...	"Building more social homes in the UK will take commitment and vision, but it is possible. We're already seeing positive steps, like a boost in funding for the Government's Affordable Homes Programme, extra funding for councils to plan and build more, and low-interest loans for registered social housing providers."
Why?	To avoid triggering the fatalistic sense that the problem is too big to solve, it helps to spell out what ambitious and long-term action looks like, as the second example does.

Further reading

- Communicating about housing in the UK: Obstacles, openings and emerging recommendations, FrameWorks UK 2021
- Moving from concern to concrete change: how to build support for more social housing, FrameWorks UK 2021
- Talking about homes: The foundation for a decent life, FrameWorks UK 2022
- Moving Mindsets: Emerging opportunities to shift culture on health, wealth and government, FrameWorks UK 2025

About FrameWorks UK

FrameWorks UK is a not-for-profit, mission-driven organisation, specialising in evidence-based communication strategies that shift hearts and minds. We help charities and other organisations communicate about social issues in ways that create progress, through practical guidance underpinned by our framing research.

We're the sister organisation of the FrameWorks Institute in the US, which has been conducting framing research for more than 25 years. FrameWorks started working in the UK in 2012. And we established FrameWorks UK in 2021.

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[i] For further detail on these sessions, see the Moving Mindsets methods supplement

This guide was written by Sophie Gordon from FrameWorks UK, as part of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Nationwide Foundation's co-funded Talking about Homes project.