



The illustration depicts a vertical stack of four colored rectangular blocks: a dark green block at the top, a medium green block, a large yellow block, and a red block. Below the red block are two more blocks, one purple and one yellow. A person in a red shirt is sitting on a dark green beam suspended by ropes from above. On the ground level, several stylized human figures are shown: a small child in a yellow shirt, a man in a blue shirt pointing up, a woman in a green shirt, and an older woman in a purple top and blue skirt carrying a large dark green block. The background is plain white.

How to talk about the building blocks of health

A toolkit

Why we need a new story about health

What is framing?

Five recommendations for boosting action on health

- 1 Show why it matters: lives are being cut short
- 2 Harness the power of explanation
- 3 Show change is possible
- 4 Use certain arguments with caution
- 5 Use data to strengthen your story, not to tell it

Putting it all together

What works and what doesn't

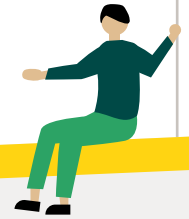
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Why we need a new story about health

Almost every aspect of our lives impacts our health and ultimately how long we will live. This includes our jobs and homes, access to education and public transport and whether we experience poverty or discrimination. These factors are often referred to as the wider determinants of health.

In the public and political debate about how to improve health in the UK, the wider determinants are often left out or misunderstood. People tend to think of health as highly individualistic; it's the food we eat and how much we exercise.

This is a challenge for those of us who want to address the widening inequalities in health across the country. But when people see how jobs, homes, hardship and discrimination link to health, they are more likely to support, and demand, the policies and actions needed to start addressing these issues.



About this toolkit

This toolkit sets out how we can frame communications to tell a more powerful story about health inequalities. The recommendations are based on a 4-year research project by [FrameWorks](#) that tested the most effective frames for increasing understanding of the role of the wider determinants of health, and support for action to address them.

It is for anyone working and communicating in the field of public health. The recommendations apply whether you are speaking to a public, political, or expert audience – just shift the tone and emphasis to tailor the message.

We want this toolkit to be practical and useful, so please feel free to use the content in your own work.

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What is framing?

Framing is making choices about what we say and how we say it. Choices about:

what we emphasise

how we explain an issue

what we leave unsaid



These choices change how people think, feel and act.

Unlike a set of key messages, frames can be used and adapted to a variety of different contexts. This enables us to tailor communications for different audiences and channels while continuing to talk about our issue in a consistent way.

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At a glance



Recommendation 1

Show why it matters: lives are being cut short

We need to open our communications with inequalities in life expectancy and the fact that too many lives are being cut short. What we say first is the most important part of our communication. It sets the scene and gets remembered.



Recommendation 2

Harness the power of explanation

Most people don't understand how the world around us shapes our health. We can increase understanding by using a building blocks metaphor or taking a 'deep-dive' explanation into one of the wider determinants of health.



Recommendation 3

Show change is possible

People can feel fatalistic about the possibility of change when it comes to health. We need to show change is possible by building solutions into our communications early and being explicit that we can make a difference.



Recommendation 4

Use certain arguments with caution

Part of telling a powerful story is knowing what to leave unsaid. Where possible, avoid talking about the economic cost of the wider determinants of health, or that we should act on the wider determinants of health to protect the NHS. In addition, avoid leading with the pandemic as these arguments have been shown to decrease support for policy changes.



Recommendation 5

Use data to strengthen your story, not to tell it

Statistics don't speak for themselves, and naked numbers can reinforce unhelpful ways of thinking, because people interpret them through their own existing beliefs. Help people make sense of facts and figures by putting them in context. Use metaphor, explanation and show why they matter.



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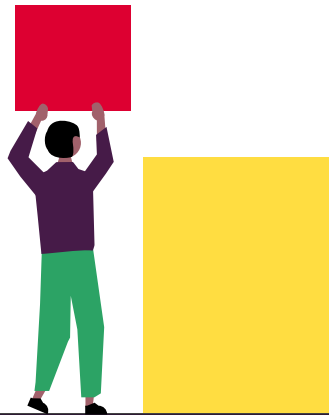
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Recommendation 1

Show why it matters: lives are being cut short

To increase support for policies and action on the wider determinants of health we need to start by showing why this is important. To do that, be clear that this is a matter of life and death.

Presenting the wider determinants of health as a matter of life and death conveys a stronger sense of urgency and importance than focusing on health and wellbeing in general. Wellbeing is always a matter of degree – life and death aren't. When we make the issue about inequalities in life expectancy and the fact that lives are being cut short, people take notice.

How to do it

- Lead with the fact that lives are being cut short to establish why health inequalities matter.
- Then explain the causes of health inequalities.



Avoid adding complexity with concepts like 'disability-free life expectancy' or 'healthy life expectancy' as few people understand what they mean.



To avoid leaving people feeling that nothing can be done, balance the urgency of this tone with clear solutions and a message that change is possible.

What does it look like?

BEFORE

'The wider determinants of health have an important influence on health inequities. In countries at all levels of income, health and illness follow a social gradient: the lower the socioeconomic position, the worse the health.'

AFTER

'Right now, in parts of the UK, people are dying years earlier than they should. When we don't have the things we need, like warm homes and healthy food, and are constantly worrying about making ends meet, it puts a strain on our bodies. This results in increased stress, high blood pressure, and a weaker immune system.'

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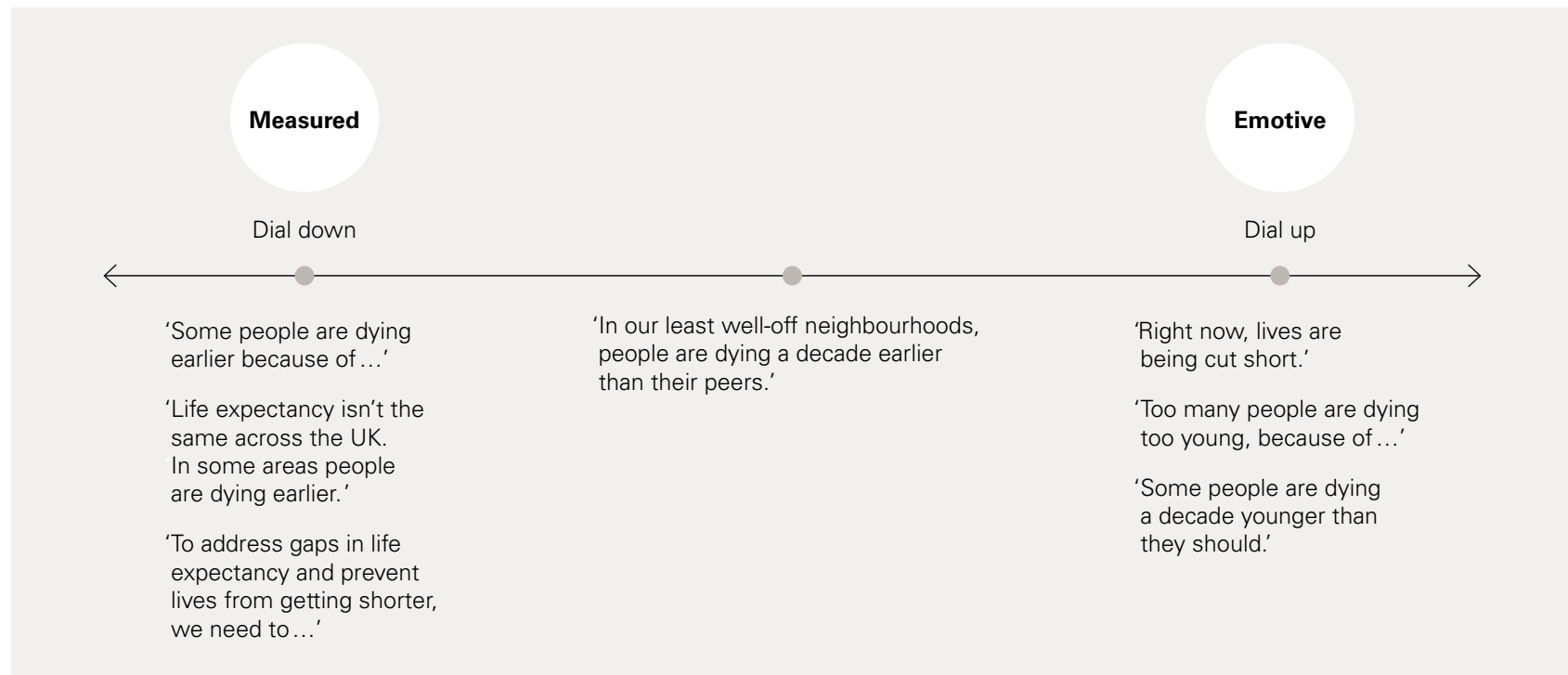


Recommendation 1

Show why it matters: lives are being cut short

Different audiences

There are lots of different ways we can flex this frame when we are speaking to different audiences and according to our own communication style. When we're speaking to the media, we might want to dial up our tone and be more emotive. When we're speaking to a commissioner, we might want to dial down the tone and be more measured. The frame provides a scaffolding that we can flex up and down:



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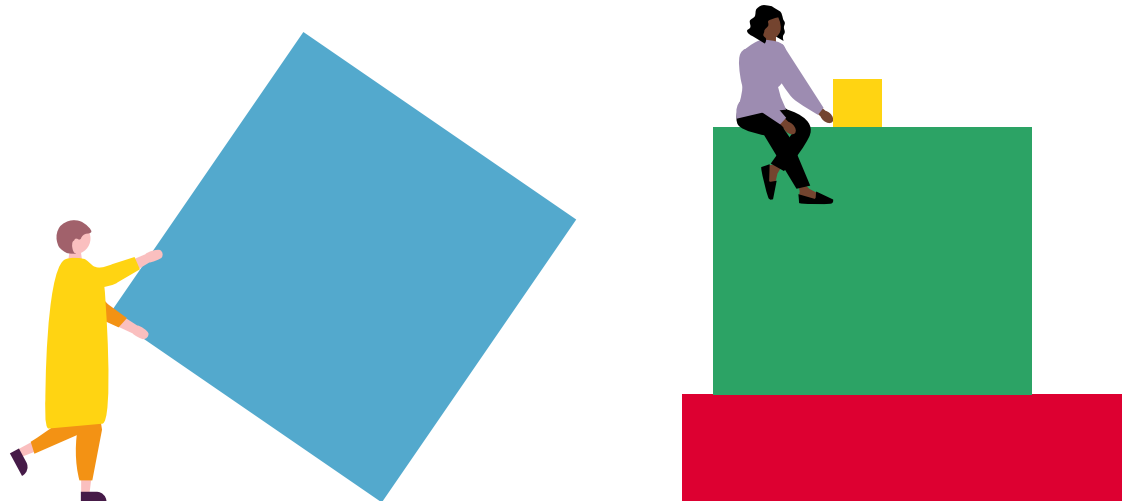
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Recommendation 2 Harness the power of explanation

People's ability to understand why and how the world around us affects our health are two of the biggest challenges for communicators.

Without this understanding, people default to the idea that 'It's just the way things are.' Or that problems are too big and complex to be tackled. And when we don't provide enough explanation, people fill in the gaps with narratives that already feel familiar to them – like 'It's up to individuals to make better choices.'

Explanation is a powerful way of bringing people with us – it increases understanding, and that helps to increase support for change.



Increasing understanding

There are two ways evidence shows we can increase understanding of the wider determinants of health through explanation:

metaphor

deep-dive explanations

More about these on pages 8–11.

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Recommendation 2 Harness the power of explanation

Use a 'building blocks' metaphor to explain the role of the wider determinants of health.

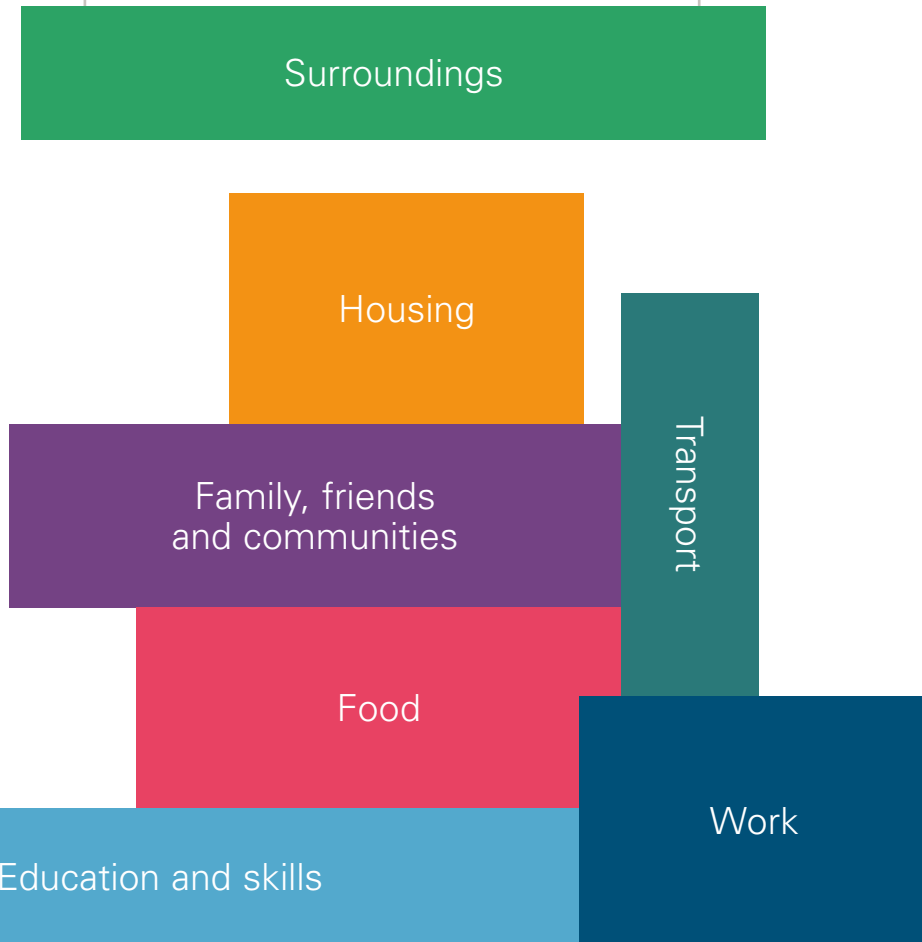
How to do it:

- Compare building a healthy society with that of constructing a sturdy building.
- A thriving community needs all the right building blocks in place: jobs, pay, housing, education.
- Explain health inequalities by talking about building blocks that are missing, or weak, and need replacing.

What does it look like?

'To create a society where everybody can thrive, we need all of the right **building blocks** in place: stable jobs, good pay, quality housing and good education.

'But right now, in too many of our communities, **blocks are missing**. It's time to fix the gaps.'



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Recommendation 2 Harness the power of explanation

Metaphors are catchy and memorable and work particularly well in headlines and press quotes:

BEFORE

A News Website

What are the wider determinants of good mental and physical health?

Health and medicine | September 2021

AFTER

A News Website

What are the building blocks of good mental and physical health?

Health and medicine | September 2021



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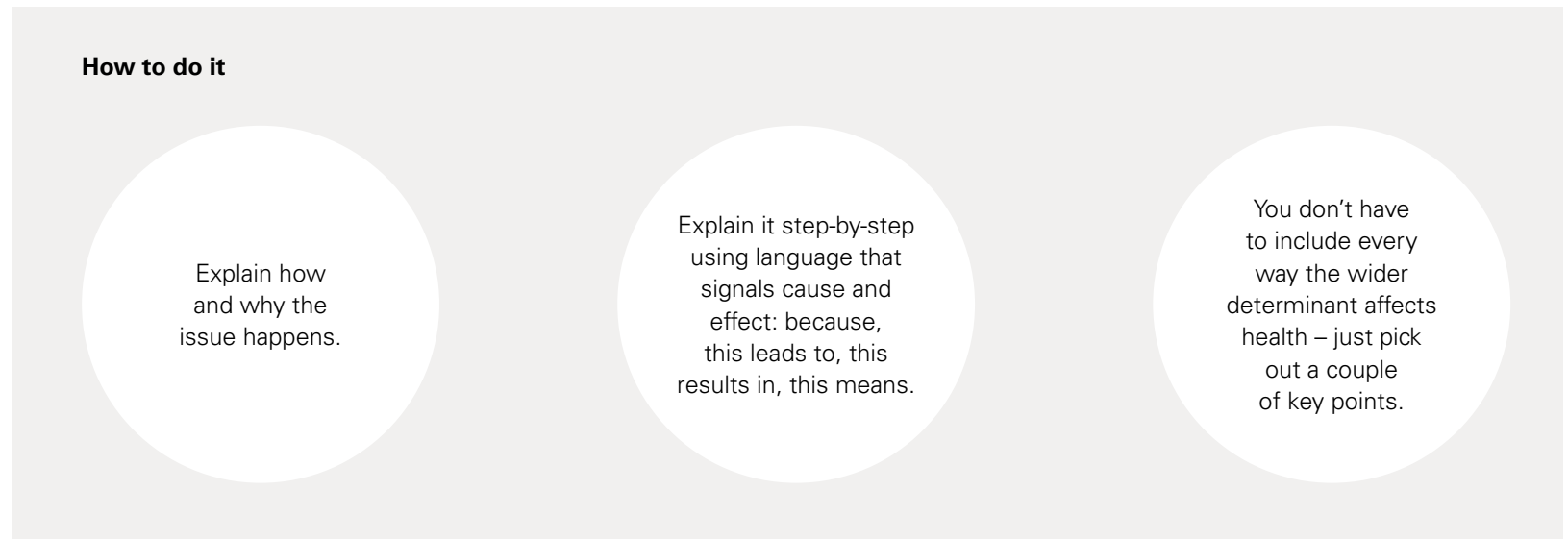
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Recommendation 2 Harness the power of explanation

Use a deep-dive to explain the role of the wider determinants of health.

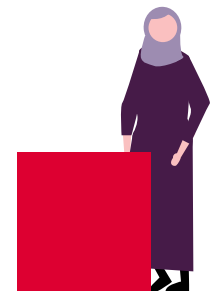
In a deep-dive explanation, we need to focus on just one of the wider determinants and explain fully how and why it affects our health.



A deep-dive explanation about jobs or housing is a particularly effective way to increase understanding.



Talk about chronic stress to explain the impact of hardship or discrimination on our health.



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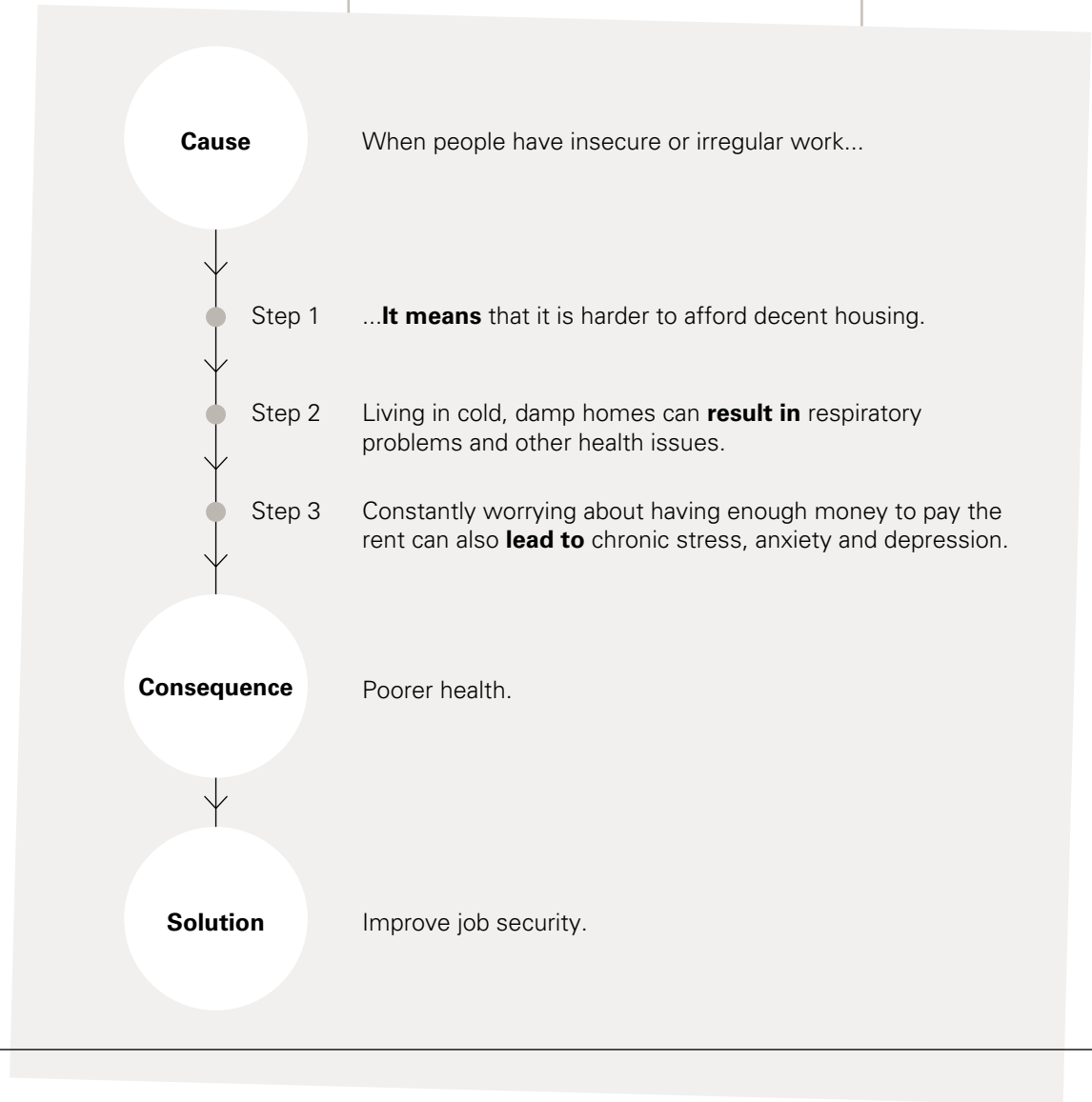
Recommendation 2 Harness the power of explanation

What it looks like?

Instead of just stating that when people have insecure or irregular work it leads to poorer health, explain how: →



Deep-dive explanations help point towards your solutions. When writing one, start by thinking of the solution you want, and then explicitly building steps that link to your solution.



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Recommendation 3

Show change is possible

How to do it

Talk explicitly about the fact that we can change this.

Show the urgency of the situation but don't leave people at the crisis – show it can be improved, and how.

Talk about solutions often and build them into communications early.

What does it look like?

'By increasing the minimum wage, we can prevent lives from being cut short.'

'Increased income means that we have what we need to heat our homes, eat healthily, and don't have to constantly worry about making ends meet.'

'As a result our bodies produce fewer stress hormones, which means lower blood pressure and a stronger immune system.'



Use the 2:1 ratio – for every dose of urgency and crisis in our communications, we need to include at least two doses of 'we can do something about this'.



Add specific, concrete solutions whenever possible to make the steps needed feel more tangible.



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Recommendation 4 Use certain arguments with caution

Sometimes what we leave unsaid is just as – or even more – important than what we do say. This is because there are ways of talking about an issue that can decrease support for what we're trying to achieve. When it comes to talking about health there are three ways of talking about the issue to **avoid** where possible:

- 1 making an argument about the economic cost of the wider determinants of health
- 2 arguing that we should act on the wider determinants of health to protect the NHS
- 3 focusing on the COVID-19 pandemic.

In situations where these arguments can't be avoided, there are ways of using them that will help to minimise the risk of decreasing support for action on wider determinants – see the following page.



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Recommendation 4 Use certain arguments with caution

Economic costs

Our research shows that making an economic argument for why people should support action to address the wider determinants of health can backfire. Describing the issues in terms of their effect on the economy, or cost to the NHS, risks triggering blame towards people experiencing poor health, and taps into individualist thinking.

If you need to provide economic evidence in your work, here is a way to do that. →



Avoid economic or monetary frames wherever possible. If you do need to provide economic evidence in your work, avoid leading with it.

How to do it

- First, lead with the impact on people. Messages that focus on the economy can be seen as commodifying human beings, which makes them immediately unpalatable.
- Lead with why the issue matters (lives are being cut short) and then expand people's understanding of what health is and the factors that shape it before adding your economic evidence. Without this explanation, economic arguments are likely to just fuel individualistic thinking.



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Recommendation 4

Use certain arguments with caution

What does it look like?

BEFORE

A News Website

Ill health in 'left behind' areas is costing England £30bn a year, says report

Economy would get a major boost if people in the most deprived regions were as healthy as those in rich areas

AFTER

A News Website

Lack of investment in 'left behind' areas is costing lives

People in the most deprived regions are dying before those in rich areas. As well as the loss of life in the poorest places, ill-health is costing an extra £30bn a year.



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Recommendation 4 Use certain arguments with caution

The NHS

Messages that focused on the NHS as a reason to address the wider determinants of health are, at best, unpersuasive, and can even backfire – making people less likely to support policies and action addressing the wider determinants of health.

Where possible, avoid making the NHS a central part of your argument about why we should act on the wider determinants of health.

How to do it

Remind people that the NHS was never meant to go it alone and it was always intended to be part of a broader system of support addressing jobs, housing, education, and public transport.

Explicitly mention people's attachment to the NHS. Talk about 'the NHS we all value and rely on' and how it's there for us 'from cradle to grave'.

Avoid making the NHS a central part of your messaging.

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Recommendation 4 Use certain arguments with caution



When you do need to talk about the NHS, explain how it should fit within a broader system of support.



What does it look like?

BEFORE

'The NHS today is under tremendous pressure to continue to deliver a service that is effective, accessible, equitable and sustainable. Improvements in life expectancy at birth might be stalling for the first time since the introduction of the NHS in 1948.'

AFTER

'The NHS we all value and rely on was never meant to go it alone. It was supposed to be part of a wider system supporting people from cradle to grave; with decent jobs, pay, homes and education. To make sure the NHS can keep helping us in the way it was intended to, we need a broader system of support that can help all of us to thrive.'

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Recommendation 4 Use certain arguments with caution

The COVID-19 pandemic

Many people have 'COVID fatigue' that makes them tune out of what you have to say when you mention the pandemic. Avoid leading with the pandemic in discussions on the wider determinants of health. Instead, only mention the pandemic when it is specific to your argument.

How to do it

Avoid leading with the effects of COVID-19 on health and life expectancy.

Acknowledge that inequalities in health and life expectancy are a long-standing issue.

Explain how the pandemic has increased existing inequalities. In other words, use COVID-19 as a way to further emphasise your main point rather than as your main point.

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Recommendation 5

Use data to strengthen your story, not to tell it

Statistics don't speak for themselves. We can help people make sense of facts and figures by putting them in context; with metaphor, explanation and by signalling why they matter.

How to do it

- **Lead with why this matters:** lives are being cut short.
- **Explain the causes:** you can do this through using the building blocks metaphor or by using words that link cause and effect (because, this leads to, this results in, this means etc).
- **Make numbers easier to understand:** place them in a familiar or relatable context. For example, you might compare numbers of people to populations of a city: 'that's the same number of people as live in Greater Manchester'.



What does it look like?

BEFORE

'Life expectancy for females is 10.2 years longer in the least deprived areas compared with the most deprived areas in Scotland. For males that difference increased to 13.5 years.'

AFTER

'Right now, people in our poorest neighbourhoods are dying a decade earlier than people in the wealthiest areas. When we don't have what we need to heat our homes, buy healthy food and are constantly worrying about making ends meet, it can lead to chronic stress, poor health and lives being cut short.'

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Persuasive stories have three key ingredients. They need to:

- 1 show why the issue matters
- 2 explain what it's about
- 3 show we can change it.

We can do this when we don't have much space – like in a tweet:

BEFORE



Twitter account

Poor-quality housing is costing more than £95m per year in treatment costs, according to a new report.

Find out about value-for-money priority areas for action to address housing quality, unsuitable homes and homelessness on our website.

#HousingandHealth

AFTER



Twitter account

Poor-quality housing is cutting lives short. Cold, damp, mouldy homes can lead to respiratory problems and other health issues.

But we can fix this by building more high-quality social housing. Find out more on our website.

#HousingandHealth



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We can also tell a persuasive story in a longer piece of copy like a press release:

'Levelling up' plan fails to put in place the building blocks for good health

February 2022

People are 'dying a decade earlier than their peers' and government levelling up plans fail to 'put in place the building blocks of good health' needed to address this, says Health Charity Director Jane Bloggs in reaction to today's (2 February 2022) levelling up white paper.

The government's levelling up plan has a focus on reducing inequalities in life expectancy, which is welcomed by the charity. However, analysis by the health organisation found that based on current trends it would take 192 years to reduce health inequalities to meet the government's own target.

To level up the country, the Health Charity is calling for the introduction of a real living wage, greater investment in quality homes and ambitious action to end child poverty.

Responding to the government's levelling up white paper, Jane Bloggs, Health Charity Director, said:

'People living in the UK's most deprived communities are dying a decade earlier than their peers. When people don't have what they need for good health – like warm homes and healthy food – and are constantly worrying about making ends meet, it leads to poorer physical and mental health.

'To level up the country, the government need to put in place the building blocks of good health: stable jobs, good pay, quality housing and education.'

'We can create the opportunities for people in the UK to thrive by improving wages, developing quality homes and reducing child poverty.'

Metaphor used early

Shows why it matters

Data used to support story

Change is possible. Here are some solutions

What we can do about it

Explanation

Reinforce the metaphor



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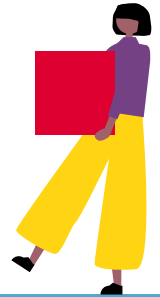
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What works and what doesn't

The research shows that certain words and ideas work better than others when talking about the wider determinants of health. We need to keep using these words and ideas to tell our stories.

Works	Doesn't work
Lead with the fact that lives are being cut short.	Make the argument about helping people to live longer, or about improving health and wellbeing.
Talk about life expectancy, lives being cut short or people dying earlier than they should.	Terms like disability-free life expectancy or healthy life expectancy.
Use a building blocks metaphor to explain the role of the wider determinants of health.	Talk about the wider determinants of health without explaining how or why they affect our health.
Talk about solutions often and be explicit that we can create change.	Focus only on describing the problem and talking about crises.
Explain how the NHS was never meant to go it alone but be part of a broader system of support providing jobs, homes, and education.	Focus on addressing the wider determinants of health to reduce the strain on the NHS.
Lead with the impact of the wider determinants of health on people before adding economic evidence.	Lead with an economic argument for why people should act on the wider determinants of health.
Put facts and figures in context with metaphor, explanation and by cueing why they matter.	Statistics on their own that don't help people understand what the numbers mean.
Plain language.	Acronyms, jargon and technical language.



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Have you started your communications by showing why this matters?

Have you *explained* how the issue you're addressing affects health?

Are you using words that link cause and effect like leads to, it means, it results in, because?

Have you tried using the building blocks metaphor?

Have you included a solution?
Is it mentioned early and repeated?

Have you put statistics or data in context?

Have you helped understanding of numbers by comparing them to something relatable?

Have you mentioned economic arguments, the NHS, or COVID-19? Check that you don't lead with them, and consider if you can avoid them altogether.

Have you replaced technical language, jargon and acronyms?



Further reading

[A matter of life and death: explaining the wider determinants of health in the UK](#)

[Only Part of the Story: Media and Organisational Discourse about Health in the United Kingdom](#)

[Seeing upstream: Mapping the gaps between expert and public understandings of health in the United Kingdom](#)

Go to frameworksinstitute.org/uk for more information

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