



# How to talk about human rights



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## INTRODUCTION

### What is this guidance?

Practical advice on communicating human rights with public audiences, based on detailed research into people's understanding, attitudes and responses to different messages.

### Who is it for?

Everyone involved in protecting people's human rights in practice in the UK, whether or not they would describe their work in this way. This might include:

- Communications, policy and campaigning experts within charities and NGOs
- Practitioners and advocates working to support people's rights in practice
- Anyone communicating with people about their rights

## WHY TALK ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS?

The UK's human rights safety net is a crucial source of legal protection for people across the country.

Human rights have produced real results for individuals and forced authorities to make their policies and practices fairer. They provide a means for those who have been mistreated or failed by the system to challenge their treatment and hold authorities to account. They provide essential protection for all of us when we're at our most vulnerable.

For example:

- Patients who experienced inhumane and degrading treatment at Mid Staffordshire hospital challenged their treatment using human rights laws.
- Human rights have been used to successfully challenge decisions that place couples in different care homes when they have lived together for years.

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- Jan, a disabled woman, was given such a low level of care that she was forced to spend all day in bed. She successfully used human rights to argue for a proper care package.
  - Rape victims whose experiences had not been adequately investigated by the police have been paid damages under human rights law.

With authorities continuing to turn a blind eye to the abuse of children and older people in care homes, we need our human rights more than ever.

But human rights are poorly understood and communicated - and are often attacked in the media. Human rights are painted as a tool for 'the undeserving' rather than something that's there for everyone. This is paving the way for possible changes to human rights laws, changes that some experts fear will weaken our legal protections and safety net.

Talking about human rights helps:

- More people to understand and assert their own rights, especially when they're in a vulnerable situation
- Build a culture of respect for everyone's rights and for the principles of equality, dignity, fairness, autonomy and respect
- Maintain and enhance our legal human rights protections

We know that many organisations are keen to see our human rights protected. But sometimes there are concerns that talking about human rights will be off-putting to a mainstream audience. Some organisations don't feel confident about talking about human rights in an everyday way.

This guidance highlights ways of talking about human rights that are proven to engage and inspire people.

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## What do people *really* know, think and feel about human rights?

In-depth research shows that few people in the UK have a detailed understanding of how human rights work in practice. There is widespread confusion around human rights laws and legal institutions.

That said, there is strong support, right across the population, for the values and principles of human rights - equality, justice and fairness.

When it comes to how they see human rights, people fall into four groups:

Undecided	41%
Supportive	22%
Opposed	26%
Uninterested	11%

By far the largest group of people are undecided about human rights. People in this group lean towards feeling positively about rights. They agree that rights create a fair society, help to protect people when they're vulnerable and see most rights as fundamental. However, they also agree with statements suggesting that human rights laws are not doing what they're supposed to do and that the human rights system is being abused.

Human rights are presented in an overwhelmingly negative light in media reports. They are rarely associated with issues most people care about and advances in equality, tolerance and fairness. Reports tend to focus on minority groups who are routinely presented as undeserving of human rights protections. Human rights are often linked to criticism of the European Union.

The media does influence people's attitudes to human rights, but it is out of step - and far more negative - than public opinion on the issue.

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The wide gap between what human rights do in reality and how they are currently talked about presents an opportunity to reclaim this space and show how human rights benefit us all every day.

## INTRODUCTION TO VALUES AND FRAMES

People are rarely persuaded by purely fact-based arguments. Often, people ignore facts and evidence that doesn't fit with their existing thinking.

Thinking about values and frames help us to communicate in a way that cuts through dry facts and complicated information to reach people, changing how debates play out.

There is a major body of research in social psychology showing us how evoking people's values can alter the way information and messages are responded to in the short and long term. Using this in our communications can help to build lasting social change.

Our **values** are the things we consider truly important in life. They are the deep guiding principles that motivate us, shape our decisions, influence how we behave and help us make sense of the world.

**Intrinsic values** are those concerned with compassion for other people and affiliation to family and friends, as well as individual autonomy and freedom. They are inherently rewarding and we care about them for their own sake.

**Extrinsic values** are concerned with external rewards or approval. They are outward looking and we care about them for the sake of wealth, status or power.

Communications and experiences that trigger certain values help to build and strengthen both those specific values and those that are related to them. Evoking intrinsic values in communications can help open the door to support for a whole range of different issues.

**Frames** are the mental structures that help us to store information in our heads. **Framing** is the idea that

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communications - stories, speeches, conversations - convey implicit values.

Communications research shows that audiences are more receptive to unfamiliar arguments when they are framed within the context of shared values. If a list of facts and arguments are presented that conflict, or appear to conflict, with an audience's core values, the audience will often disregard the facts. It is therefore essential to tie arguments to values that matter to persuadable audiences.

When it comes to human rights, these values are equality, justice and fairness - and we know there is support across the population for these concepts.

Reframing debates - such as the debate around human rights - takes time and repetition. By repeatedly connecting with people's values, we can give audiences a comfortable, or at least familiar, place to start their thinking. We can also help to change some of predictable and inaccurate ways they may currently view the issue.

### **Example: From 'under occupancy' charge to 'bedroom tax'**

In March 2011 the Coalition Government introduced a Welfare Reform Bill, which included a new 'under-occupancy penalty charge'.

The National Housing Federation, realising the implications of this change, started to talk to members of the House of Lords on what it meant. One of their briefs referred to the charge as a 'bedroom tax'. Opposition politicians and commentators picked up on the new name and started using it in debates and the media.

By the time the Welfare Reform Act became law in 2013, newspapers of every political leaning were talking about the bedroom tax.

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In an effort to reclaim the ground, the Government tried to reframe it again as the ‘Spare Room Subsidy (Removal)’. It didn’t catch on. The ‘bedroom tax’ became a symbol of the austerity measures and has been repeatedly challenged in domestic courts and by international observers.

The ‘bedroom tax’ is a clever example of reframing. It consciously harks back to the almost universally unpopular ‘poll tax’. It sounds like a contradiction in terms - evoking the safety and simplicity of a bedroom with the cold bureaucracy of taxation. While its defenders kept trying to call it a subsidy removal, and used facts to argue that it isn’t even a tax, they got nowhere. The ‘facts’ simply bounced off. Once the ‘bedroom tax’ caught on, there was no stopping it.

## **TALKING ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS POSITIVELY - WHAT WORKS?**

Many charities and voluntary organisations are working on campaigns and issues that affect people’s human rights - bringing these stories out into the public debate is a fantastic opportunity to reframe human rights.

Appealing to people’s intrinsic values builds support for human rights. This means evoking compassion for other people and highlighting the values that underpin human rights: fairness and equality.

Our research shows that specific ways of talking about human rights increases how positively people feel about them:

- Emphasising the relevance of human rights in everyday life increases how positively everyone feels about them. This means being specific about how human rights benefit a wide range of people, for instance showing how human rights benefit children, people in care, victims of domestic violence and people experiencing mental health problems.

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- Talking about the tradition and heritage of human rights increases positivity among those who are uninterested in, or opposed to, rights.
  - Simply expressing human rights as something that “we” can be proud of or “we” should support has a very positive impact on those who are undecided about human rights
  - Appealing to these people’s values is more effective than trying to counter the negative framing of human rights. This means avoiding repeating or refuting negative statements on rights, and instead introducing new ideas and connections.

## Examples

We tested a range of messages with people who were undecided about human rights. The following messages were most successful in increasing positivity:

*“We all have an equal human right to high quality, compassionate care, whether we have a physical or mental health problem.”*

*“Children have the human right to a childhood free from poverty. That means sometimes we need the state to help make sure that every child has enough to eat, proper clothing and a safe warm home.”*

*“As many as 5,000 people in the UK today are victims of slavery or trafficking. We need to do more to protect the human rights of victims and prosecute offenders.”*

*“When we use care services, we all need our human rights to make sure we have privacy, dignity and independence.”*

*“People with mental health problems who are victims of crime have the same human right to justice as everyone else. The police and criminal justice system must take their experiences seriously.”*

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*“Kirsty was killed by her partner Steve after years of abuse by him. Murders like this happen every week. Every woman’s human right to be protected from this sort of violence must be a priority.”*

*“Any one of us could have a mental health crisis. We all have an equal human right to be treated with dignity, respect and compassion if it happens to us.”*

*“It’s terrifying for children and young people when they witness or are accused of a crime. The criminal justice system needs to do more to protect their human rights in these situations.”*

These messages take an issue people care about, one which may be relevant to their own lives or remind them of people they care about, and connects it with human rights. Because most people don’t have a detailed understanding of what human rights do in practice, showing how they relate to them and their family is a first step in evoking and building compassion. These connections need to be repeated again and again, and can then be built on when they are secure in people’s minds. Re-framing is a long process requiring repetition and imagination.

### **Human rights messages in action**

Below are examples of real human rights abuses that have been reported in the press. We’ve looked at how human rights values could have been introduced in statements and tweeted responses.

#### **EXAMPLE 1: “15 minute” home care visits**

##### **What was the issue?**

The government announcement of a review into 15-minute care visits to older and disabled people following concerns that such appointments deprive people of their dignity and put unfair pressure on staff.

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**How could human rights values have been conveyed in responding to this?**

“Everyone is entitled to receive a high standard of home care, which supports them to lead healthy, independent lives. Good home care means supporting people to live full lives as independently as possible - it cannot be sliced up into 15 minute chunks. The current approach to home care is stripping away the human element of caring, it’s time to put our human rights at the centre of care.”

**EXAMPLE 2: “Human rights stop child abuse being investigated”**

**What was the issue?**

The Rotherham child abuse inquiry detailed a mother who attempted to hand her daughter’s phone to the police because it contained evidence of her being abused. She was told that it would be a breach of her daughters’ human rights for the phone to be considered as evidence.

**How could human rights values have been conveyed in responding to this?**

TWEET: Rotherham police got it wrong on #humanrights - they are not an excuse for inaction but a powerful tool for fairness and justice. Ignoring victims’ abuse is the real abuse of their rights.

**EXAMPLE 3: People experiencing mental health problems are having their human rights denied**

**What was the issue?**

A comprehensive study from a coalition of mental health groups showed that thousands of people attempt suicide while on NHS waiting lists for psychological help.

**How could human rights values have been conveyed in responding to this?**

TWEET: We all have an equal human right to quality, compassionate care, whether we have a physical or mental health problem. It's time we treated people as human beings.

## **WHAT NEXT?**

Equally Ours works with a wide range of charities every day to support them to integrate human rights and related values into their communications.

**How we can work with you:**

- Provide training in the research we've done and how to use it
- Work closely with you to weave in human rights values to your organisation and communications
- Collect, write up and film case studies that bring human rights to life, see [www.equally-ours.org.uk/stories](http://www.equally-ours.org.uk/stories)

### **More information**

For a more detailed guide to using frames and values in communications, read the Common Cause handbook:

<http://valuesandframes.org/>

This guidance is based on detailed research over a number of years and on our experience of working with a wide range of different organisations. This research is unpublished but available upon request. Please contact [info@equally-ours.org.uk](mailto:info@equally-ours.org.uk)

# TALKING ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS - A SUMMARY

## What we know works:



### **Make human rights relevant**

Talk about how human rights benefit a wide range of people and issues that people already care about - children, people in care, victims of domestic violence, people experiencing mental health problems.



### **Use inclusive words and phrases**

Express human rights as something “we” can be proud of, or that help “all of us”.



### **Showcase human rights ‘wins’**

Give specific but concise examples of where human rights have been an agent for change and produced real results for individuals and society.



### **Demonstrate how human rights bring to life values we all share**

Use phrases like ‘freedom’, ‘fairness’, ‘justice’ and ‘equality’ as values that underpin human rights. Talk about ‘our pride in having human rights’.



### **Focus on your arguments, not theirs**

Pivot away and shift the focus back to positive messages about human rights.

## What doesn't work (for most people):



### **Educating with facts**

Facts alone won't bring people round to your way of thinking - if a fact doesn't chime with a person's own experience it will simply bounce off them.



### **Arguments about legal and procedural issues**

Few people will be interested in engaging in the detail of how human rights institutions and laws work in practice. Those that do are probably already positive about human rights!



### **Myth-busting**

Myth-busting helps to reinforce negative views. Most people won't hear your ‘truth,’ they'll hear the original argument you're trying to disprove.



### **International arguments**

Arguing that Britain should be setting an example internationally creates very mixed responses. It relies on people caring a lot about fairness in other countries when in reality very few people prioritise this above domestic concerns.