KANTAR PUBLIC

How people in housing need feel about the way they are described by UK poverty charities

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A report prepared for Shelter by Kantar Public

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Executive Summary

Representations of people – often those whom do not have the opportunity to speak for themselves – is a complex ethical issue that not only affects those spoken *about* but the effectiveness of the organisation *doing the speaking*.

Charities and policy makers currently use a range of terms to describe the people they work with, campaign on behalf of or target for support. These include *'vulnerable people'*, *'struggling families'*, *'people with complex needs'*, *'people in poverty'*, *'the most deprived'*, and the *'just about managing'*. While these terms may encompass or generate an understanding of who these groups are speaking about to a wider audience, the terms have yet to be reflected on and reviewed by the people to which they describe. Do they feel these terms describe their experiences? Do they recognise themselves in these terms? How do these terms make them feel? And how would they describe themselves in relation to their housing and economic situation?

This research explores how people who are homeless or struggling with housing costs think about the terminology used by policy makers and UK poverty and homelessness charities to describe them, and the reasons for their views.

Method

Shelter commissioned Kantar Public to conduct individual and paired qualitative depth interviews with 46 people across England and Scotland. This included 32 people on a low income and struggling with housing costs[1], as well as 14 people who had recently experienced homelessness or were currently homeless. The sample included a mix of people in work and some not currently working, a mix of men and women and a mix of those with dependent children and those without.

Interviews explored how participants perceived themselves before considering how others (including UK poverty charities) described them. We then explored reactions to campaign materials and different terminology, before exploring how participants wanted to be described in the future.

Findings

Awareness of previous campaigns

In line with Shelter's previous research, there was low prior awareness of housing and anti-poverty campaigns. The participants in this research did not recall being offended by campaigns by Shelter and other anti-poverty charities. Participants assumed that campaigns about homelessness would convey a narrow understanding of homelessness, i.e. street sleeping. This reflected their wider expectations about and experiences of public discourse on homelessness.

Participants' self-perceptions

When asked to describe themselves, participants used positive language that focused on their strength and resilience in the face of their struggles with housing and poverty. Themes emerging from discussion included strength of character, bravery, and personal resilience. Participants also spoke of their independence, their

[1] See Section 1.3.2 on Sampling

resourcefulness and responsibility, based on their experiences of dealing with crisis and striving to get the support they needed. Some also identified as proud and hard working. Across the sample, participants expressed a sense of personal good fortune and luck in relation to others, as based on their experience and social circles, they felt there was always someone in a worse situation. Whilst low income and housing situations were important, they rarely formed part of participants' identity or the way they described or thought about themselves. While some participants were recruited on the basis they had recently or were currently experiencing homelessness not all spontaneously describe their situations as homeless. While they may have met the legal criteria for homelessness[2] they did not identify with the term *'homelessness'*. Instead, individuals focussed on the positive, active choices they had made in response to the challenges they had faced. Campaigns that use terms that are not part of people's identity such as *'poor'* or *'disadvantaged'* may not resonate with the audience at which they are aimed.

Responses to language

Participants were presented with words and phrases commonly used by anti-poverty and homelessness charities. Overall, participants strongly preferred language that was situational and specific, linking housing situations to circumstances rather than to the person. For example, *'families that need to top up their income'* was positively received as it cited specific circumstances that people could relate to. On the other hand, *'poor'*, *'destitute'* or *'vulnerable'* felt like passive labels that attached a level of blame to an individual for their situation. Passivity in language was also disliked as it contradicted individuals' experiences of actively struggling to improve their situations, and denied their agency.

Further to this, people disliked language that presented their experiences as *'typical'* or *'ordinary'* because they did not consider their experiences in this way. Furthermore, when referring to 'average families' there is a risk of alienating people because there is a breadth of family structures. As a result, men in particular were less engaged with campaign materials that depicted *'typical'* families. Instead, participants preferred active language that reflected the complexity of personal situations and the difficult circumstances that can lead to homelessness. For example, the use of the term *'complex'* prompted participants to 'read in' a variety of issues personally relevant to them, including mental health, disability, and addiction. Using this kind of language could have a broad appeal is it can capture complexity while feeling situationally specific.

Finally, use of the term *'hidden homeless'* was universally endorsed because it personally resonated with people's own experience and challenged what people saw as the dominant public discourse about homelessness. The endorsement was from both people who had and had not experienced homelessness. Participants felt the term addressed the complexity of people's experiences of homelessness and felt empathetic towards people experiencing homelessness.

Differences in responses by audiences

We conducted fieldwork in Plymouth and Helston in Cornwall, London, Manchester and Glasgow. Participants in Manchester and Glasgow were more likely to respond positively to language referring to working class narratives or hard graft. This kind of language felt less relevant to participants interviewed in the south of England. Women's experiences as a mother or partner and men's experiences of the housing system influenced their responses.

Recommendations for anti-poverty and homelessness charities

While language currently used did not offend, it could be tweaked to better resonate with their experiences and reflect their preferences. Generic, broad, or passive 'labels' were disliked; instead, terms or phrases that feel specific and contextual could be more effective. Using words like *'complex'* can strike a useful balance here, as it has broad applicability whilst feeling personal and specific. Language that most resonated with participants was situational and transitional, representing homelessness or housing struggles as linked to

[2] http://england.shelter.org.uk/get_advice/homelessness/help_from_the_council_when_homeless/homelessness_are_you_homeless

circumstances and not as something tied to a person's identity. Whilst the use of families in campaigns resonated well with some, as it was an important and emotional dimension of their experience, it does not always reflect the various experiences people can have when negotiating housing support, particularly amongst men or even single parent families.

The term *'hidden homeless'* provides a number of opportunities for charities. Firstly, it resonates powerfully with a variety of experiences and can feel personally relevant. Secondly, it helps to shed light on the full spectrum of experiences of homelessness, countering dominant and often stigmatising narratives about street homelessness. Thirdly, this phrase prompted some people to recognise the personal housing struggles they had experienced as more serious, suggesting that the use of this phrase could prompt others to realise their situation is not necessarily the norm, potentially encouraging them to take action earlier.

1. Introduction to the research

1.1 Project background

Representations of people – often those whom do not have the opportunity to speak for themselves – is a complex ethical issue that not only affects those spoken *about* but the effectiveness of the organisation *doing the speaking*.

Charities and policy makers currently use a range of terms to describe the people they work with, campaign on behalf of or target for support. These include *'vulnerable people'*, *'struggling families'*, *'people with complex needs'*, *'people in poverty'*, *'the most deprived'*, and the *'just about managing'*. While these terms may encompass or generate an understanding of who these groups are speaking about to a wider audience, the terms have yet to be reflected on and reviewed by the people to which they describe. Do they feel these terms describe their experiences? Do they recognise themselves in these terms? How do these terms make them feel? And how would they describe themselves in relation to their housing and economic situation?

These questions are grounded in the ethical belief that people have the right to self-identify and that allies have a responsibility to use the language of those who are being spoken about to describe them.

The importance of getting language right for the organisations who seek to tackle disadvantage is an issue of wider interest to both the organisations and service users.

1.2 Project aims

Shelter commissioned Kantar Public to undertake research into how the people they support feel about the way they are represented by Shelter, other anti-poverty and housing charities and other commentators. This research aimed to inform how Shelter and others communicate about their users and community in a way that respects and reflects how they see themselves.

The project asks what do people who are homeless and those struggling to meet housing costs think about the terminology used by UK poverty charities to describe their beneficiaries, in terms of:

- Who they think the different terms relate to;
- Whether and to what extent different groups recognise themselves in these terms;
- How these terms make them feel about themselves, e.g. whether the terms are perceived as pejorative in any sense, whether they suggest any negative connotations such as helplessness, or whether the ends are seen to justify the means in any sense;
- Whether they have ever noticed this / taken issue with this in previous exposure to housing charity campaigns;
- How views are influenced by people's current housing situation (e.g. in temporary accommodation or not) and /or whether individuals have sought support from Shelter/other organisations, etc.
- How would they like to see campaigning charities describe them and people like them, in terms of which phrases are more or less acceptable, and the reasons for these views.

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 Research design

Kantar Public undertook individual and paired depth interviews with 46 people across England and Scotland. Interviews were held in community centres. Participants were given the opportunity to invite a friend or relative who also met the recruitment criteria outlined below, and with whom they felt comfortable discussing sensitive issues. The interviews lasted 45 minutes to an hour.

1.3.2 Sampling

The achieved sample table and figure outlines the primary quotas for research. Interviews took place in Glasgow, Manchester, London and Plymouth and Helston in Cornwall. Three groups were engaged as part of this research. The first group included those who were currently or recently homeless (within three years). Groups 2 and 3 were people who were struggling with housing costs and on a low income, with participants who were working and not working respectively. While participants self-defined as to whether they were struggling with housing costs (to ensure people felt the experience of struggle), all participants were also on a low income[3]. The sample included a mix of people who had dependents and those who did not. Finally, there was a range of secondary quotas to ensure a range of age, gender and disability status. These are outlined in Appendix 3.

Table 1: Achieved fieldwork sample on primary quotas

Achieved sample		
GROUP 1	Anyone currently or recently homeless (within 3 years)	14 participants
GROUP 2 Working	Struggling with housing costs and on a low income	20 participants
GROUP 3 Not working		26 participants
Dependents		29 participants
TOTAL		**46 participants**

Figure 1: Fieldwork locations

1.4 Recruitment

[3] Low income was defined as less than the ONS median household income for 2015/16 which was £26,400

https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/nowcastinghouseholdincomeintheuk/2015to2016

Participants were recruited using two methods: via a sample of previous clients provided by Shelter and free find recruitment. A screening questionnaire was used to ensure robust recruitment. All participants received £40 worth of high street vouchers and £10 cash to cover costs incurred.

1.5 Interview structure

The research was designed to understand participants' perception of themselves and their world from their point of view. Using photography as a pre-task and a tool during the interview participants visually represented their world view both literally and metaphorically. The photos provided a snapshot of their lives which were explained further in the interview. Some of the requests for photographs were literal – where did you stay? While others were emotionally led – a moment you were frustrated?

Those who did not have access to a smartphone or camera were asked to describe their situation rather than discuss the photos. During the interview the focus of the interview started with self-perceptions and self-descriptions before considering how participants felt others perceived them. Moderators or participants wrote these words down which were recorded on a grid of descriptors The photographs and grids allowed for the participants to engage with broader issues of representation through their own representations. These exercises provided us insight into the language they use and the ways in which they refer to themselves. A full topic guide is included in Appendix A. Examples of the terminology and campaign materials showed are also included in Appendix B. Interactive activities (outlined in Appendix A and B) were used in discussions, designed to be fun and engaging for participants, as well as facilitating discussion if participants had lower levels of literacy.

1.6 Analysis

After the interviews were completed researchers were involved in an analysis brainstorm. This session was to discuss the key findings from each interview before researchers wrote up detailed notes. After these had been reviewed there was a second brainstorm where the key themes and story development took place. Responses were aggregated looking at themes and any differences across participant groups. This process was grounded in participant experiences.

As part of the research a film was created using audio recordings from the interviews and photographs provided by participants for Shelter's internal use including disseminating research findings. As part of the analysis process photographs and completed stimulus were used to add depth of understanding and to add context to participants' identities and lived experiences. Participants gave consent for the film to be used for internal research purposes but not for broad publication. For confidentiality, the film will not be published however anonymised quotes throughout this report are from these recorded interviews and are used to add richness to the findings presented. When interpreting these findings, the focus is on the drivers and responses behind participants' reactions to campaign materials and terminology. The research was not designed to assess the merits of each term quantitatively. Rather to understand participants' thoughts and feelings towards the language.

2. Awareness of previous housing campaigns

Key findings

- Participants had low to no awareness of previous housing or homelessness campaigns
- There was a perception homelessness only relates to situations such as street sleeping which is similar to wider public discourse on the issue

In this section we discuss participants' awareness of past campaigns and their views towards them.

2.1 Awareness and feelings about charity campaigns

Participants were asked about previous campaigns relating to poverty, housing issues or homelessness to gauge their awareness and perceptions of the language used. In line with previous research, participants generally had very low awareness of campaigns.

However, people who had seen campaigns relating to homelessness and housing issues did feel a connection to the materials. When participants could recall campaigns on housing and homelessness they focused on acute homelessness, i.e. visible forms of homelessness such as street sleeping. This reflects participants' expectations about wider public discourse on the issue. Although they recognised there may be more stigma associated with this form of homelessness, people did not feel stigmatised by materials they had seen.

2.2 Perception of how charities would feel about them and their situation

Participants were asked during their interview to describe how they thought charities would view them.

Overall they felt that charities would be more sympathetic to their situation when compared to government. This related in part to their experiences of engaging with government in terms of facing difficulties accessing housing support.

Participants who were not homeless assumed charities (in general) were more focused on rough sleeping over improving bad housing or poverty more broadly.

Some participants did not feel that they would be in a situation serious enough to warrant support by a charity. Their housing struggles felt normal and commonplace. People who had no past interactions with charities focused on poverty, housing or homelessness did not think that they would be concerned by their situation. One mother struggling to work and pay her private rental costs due to illness did not think she would be the focus of any charities as she is not eligible for social housing. Another participant who had been sofa surfing with her adult children had not considered she would qualify for support because she has an uninhabitable house shared with an ex-partner. She did recognise during the interview she might be in a situation that a charity would support her with. In contrast, those who were already in touch with housing charities knew and expected that charities would want to help people struggling with housing costs or homelessness and, recognise these groups of people need support.

3. Participants' self-perceptions

Key findings

- People in this research referred to themselves in relation to others they knew in their social circle
- Participants' housing situation was important to their daily life, and a source of frustration, but did not play a strong role in how they perceived themselves
- Participants' focussed on the positive in their perceptions of self, highlighting their resilience and agency in response to the struggles they had experienced

In this section we discuss how participants described themselves. This set the context for the ways in which they interact with and respond to communications.

As explained in Section 1.3 on methodology, interviews sought to understand participants' perceptions of themselves and their world from their point of view. This included a pre interview activity where participants took photos that they felt represented their lives.

3.1 How people relate their experiences to others

When discussing social issues related to poverty, bad housing and homelessness, campaigners and policy makers have a tendency to refer to people as specific demographic groups, and in relation to the wider population rather than as individuals. For example, 'people in poverty' or 'workers on low incomes'. This could be because policy makers are interested in the whole of the UK population so it makes sense to them to consider people in relation to this wider population. Furthermore, certain demographic factors or other unifying characteristics mean people are at a higher risk of experiencing homelessness or other poverty related issues.

In contrast to this, participants in this research referred to themselves in relation to others they know through their daily lives. These experiences and social circles framed their interpretation of the campaign materials presented. When considering the language presented and discussing housing and poverty, participants related this back to their own experiences and the experiences of friends, family, neighbours and colleagues.

Amongst participants, there was a strong feeling of universality when it came to the risk of becoming homeless in the sense that it was perceived as something that could affect anyone in society. While people do not always recognise themselves as *'homeless'* those who are at risk of homelessness tend to perceive it as a universal risk. This may be as the risk of homelessness is more normalised in the communities they live in. For example, a middle aged single man in Manchester had seen reports on the news of people living rough in his city:

> *"It's not relevant to me but it could be me, it could happen to anyone" (Manchester, social housing, Not-working)*

While the man did not directly relate to the material in relation to his circumstances, he connected it to his wider community. Another participant who lived in temporary accommodation explained how she had seen the number for Shelter in a campaign. She had kept it *"just in case"* any of her friends or family ever needed support but it came to be that she was the one who needed it. For these and other participants there was a

feeling that homelessness could happen to anyone. When they were talking about 'anyone' they meant 'anyone in their social circles and communities'. This was particularly the case for the people we interviewed in Manchester and Glasgow because these participants spent most of their lives in the same working class or struggling community. From the point of view of participants, homelessness is a universal risk when in reality the risk is much higher for those in their community who are also on no to low incomes. Terms and materials that communicate that housing and homelessness struggles are a reality for whole communities rather than individuals may be the most resonant.

3.2 How people described themselves and their own circumstances

Overall, participants chose to highlight the positive in their descriptions of themselves and their situation, rather than defining themselves by the challenging circumstances they faced. Participants also cited their relationships, their personal experiences and journeys (i.e. comparing where they had been with where they are now) to describe themselves. For example, parents discussed the role they played in their children's lives, seeing this as a core part of their identity.

Five themes emerged from the descriptions participants gave of themselves that relate back to their lived experiences and identities.

Participants described how they saw themselves as ***independent, resourceful* and *responsible***. For these participants it was important to highlight their agency within their own situations. For example, one participant described the resourcefulness required to navigate a complex system of government to receive the support they require and are entitled to, given the fact they were experiencing homelessness. Some participants, as discussed further below, described their *pride* in themselves and their *hard working attitude*.

Parents also highlighted their role in providing for their children. For interviewees who were parents to dependent children, their role as ***a mother or father*** *was central to their identity and daily lives*. These participants spoke extensively about their roles as parents. Parents shared images of their children and things their children had done that made them smile or frustrated them. For example, one mother shared a photo of a letter from her daughter:

> *"Dear mum,*
> *I don't want [these coins]. I'm not the one who has to pay the bills you are. I want you to have them.*
> *All I was going to do was get myself Pokémon cards but I realised you need it more*
> *I LOVE YOU*
> *your daughter [name]" (verbatim from a photograph of a letter from a participant's young daughter)*

When communicating with parents about housing struggles, speaking about experiences of parenthood may resonate. However, this should be with caution as language around families does not appeal to all groups and can be potentially alienating. This distinction is discussed further below

Participants described their ***good fortune* and *luck at their situation***. Almost irrespective of housing tenure there was a strong feeling among participants that there is always someone in a worse off situation. This reflected participants' social networks, where they often knew others in more difficult circumstances, so felt comparatively fortunate. For some, this was having a roof over their head even though they struggled to afford it. One participant gave the example of how lucky she was to be in social housing, while recognising the sixteen-year wait to receive a placement. Participants appeared to take a humble approach to their situations, often downplaying or accepting difficult housing situations as 'normal'.

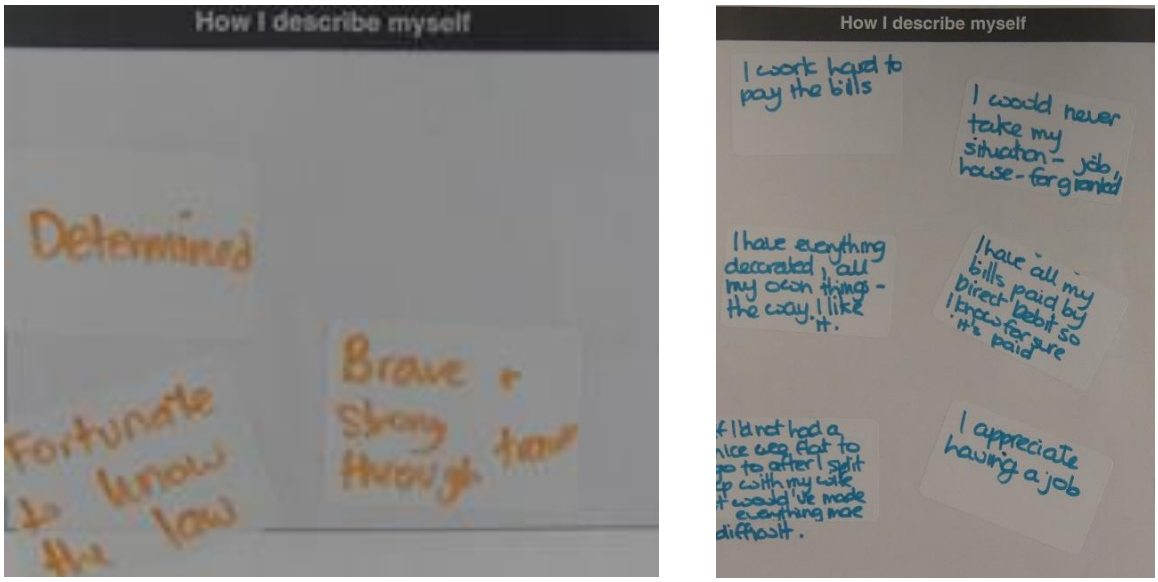
Participants described feeling ***resilient and able to make the best of their situation*** when talking about the experiences of living through homelessness or struggling with housing costs. One participant shared a photo of a box of Jaffa Cakes they had purchased in a supermarket sale that he explained he treated himself after he had been sleeping rough. Another participant shared a photograph of clouds in the sky lit up in rich oranges and purples as the sun set outside her single room in a hostel. She explained it is important to look for the beauty and to consider her space 'home' for her family despite believing it to be unsuitable

accommodation. For these participants and others their housing situation may be important to them but it does not define how they perceive themselves. Their positive response to it, was as or more important than the situation itself.

Participants gave examples of ***frustrations related to their financial struggles or housing situations***. Some participants did share images of the financial difficulty they experienced on a day to day basis, such as letters from debt collectors or screenshots of their bank account balance with little left for the month. Financial struggles were a source of concern and central to their everyday experiences. Unsuitable housing such as a single hostel room for a mother and two children or a smoking hostel for an asthmatic child were sources of frustration for parents in particular. Participants described themselves in positive language.

The next section describes participants' responses to campaigns and the perceived gap between how government and campaigners described them and the ways in which they describe themselves.

Figure 2: An example of completed stimulus showing the language participants used to describe themselves



4. Responses to language

Key findings

- The language currently used by Shelter and other anti-poverty charities does not overtly offend but it could be tweaked to capture the diversity of experiences of housing struggles and homelessness and the uniqueness of people's individual circumstances or situations.
- Participants respond best to language that is specific to their situations and does not place blame on individuals
- Language which recognises the breadth and complexity of unique circumstances resonates with participants
- Signifier language has broad appeal when it captures complexity and feels situationally specific to individuals

In this section we discuss participants' reactions to specific terminology and discuss the drivers behind their reactions before suggesting terminology to focus on in future campaigns.

Participants were presented with campaign materials and a list of terms used by Shelter and other anti-poverty charities to describe people struggling with housing costs and those experiencing or at risk of homelessness (See Appendix B). Participants were asked to pick words that stood out to them as positive or negative descriptors of themselves or others in similar circumstances, and discuss the reasons for their choices[4]. The terminology tested has been categorised according to whether participants liked or disliked it, highlighting the reasons for this. These are presented in the tables below. Below that, we discuss the drivers behind positive and negative reactions.

Table 2: Summary of positive reactions to language discussed during interviews

Language which resonated	
Active language which felt situational and specific	• Private tenant/ private renter • People who need to top up their monthly income • Families struggling to get by • Hard pressed families • Families who have fallen between the cracks • Just about managing families

[4] It should be noted that the purpose of this exercise was not to comprehensively (or quantitatively) test responded to a long list of terms. Rather, participants discussed those terms that most stood out to them, and the reasons behind this, to draw out the drivers of these perceptions.

Language which acknowledged the complexity of people's situations and experiences	• People with complex needs • Multiple and complex needs • Complex and vulnerable people • Hidden homeless

Table 3: Summary of negative reactions to language discussed during interviews

Language which did not resonate	
Passive labels	• Destitute people • Desperate people • People in housing poverty • Poor people/families • The working poor • Disadvantaged people
Language which was broad and did not personally resonate	• Hardest-to-help • Hard to reach people • Homeless people • Homeless families • Vulnerable renters • Vulnerable people
Language which felt generic and did not capture the complexity of people's circumstances	• Average families • Ordinary families • Typical families • Families on average incomes
Negative stereotypes	• Troubled families • Chaotic lives

Overall, participants liked campaigns that used language that met the following criteria:

4.1 Using active language

Participants did not like passive terms like '*poor'* and '*destitute'.* In some cases these terms were felt to be technically correct but labelled the individual rather than labelling their situation. This did not aid in participants' understanding of materials and it did not build resonance. Participants were used to navigating this complex public and charity sector and understood the need to be strategic in their language and actions. While they did not like to be passive there was a feeling passive language is embedded in the system. Wherever possible participants choose to avoid this, instead preferring language that speaks to unique experiences or journeys. As discussed in Section 3 participants saw themselves not in relation to their income but instead their personal qualities like bravery and resilience. Interviewees also wanted to see campaigns that also took an active tone, and recognised the need to change what they perceived as problems in the system, such as shortcomings of local authorities.

4.2 Using situational and specific language

Participants preferred language that was situational and specific. Situational language links housing issues with circumstances rather than to a person. Language that related to specific circumstances resonated with participants because it reinforced the idea that housing and homelessness struggles are distinct from people's identities (as discussed in Section 3). Specific language helps brings a description to life and accurately reflects people's experiences of housing issues. Broad terms do not resonate as they do not feel applicable. For example, *'families fallen between the cracks'* were considered positive terms because they accurately captured people's experiences. These terms are more focused and situational rather than alternative terms like *'struggling families'*. This term appears to label as it does not separate the 'struggle' from the' family unit' and it is unclear from the term what the struggle relates to. For example, an unemployed man from Cornwall living in social housing explained how a housing situation can make people feel stuck or like they have '*fallen between the cracks'*. He described the difficulty he experienced in getting out of difficult housing situations without support which is not always available. Before he got the support he needed to provide for his family he felt *"stuck"* in his one-bedroom flat. For him, *'families struggling to get by'* accurately summarised his situation as it recognised his personal hard work *to get by* and to improve the situation for his family and it did not apportion blame. For him it felt like *'families struggling to get by'* was describing:

> *"Something that happens to you rather than something you are." (Helston, social housing, not working)*

Wherever possible language should aim to feel as specific as possible and relate to situations rather than label something inherent to people.

4.3 Acknowledge the complexity of situations

Participants preferred language that acknowledged the diversity of people and the complexity of both their personal and housing situations. Terms that portrayed people as '*average'* or '*typical'* did not tend to resonate because participants believed they did not reflect their unique and individual circumstances. Participants further saw '*average'* or '*typical'* as too broad, devaluing their uniqueness. For example, one mother explained that she did not believe that any family should be classed as *ordinary* as people are all different:

> *"Every family has a story, so I don't think any family is ordinary" (London, temporary accommodation, not working)*

The challenge to the notion of 'average' highlights the importance of personal experiences – participants wanted to see their stories reflected in the language and communications charities use.

When referring to '*average families'* there is a risk of alienating people because there is a breadth in family structures and a feeling among participants that the *ordinary* or nuclear family no longer exists. Some felt that these phrases alluding to what they saw as outdated stereotypes around what families look like. A father who had separated from his wife described what he saw in the term '*typical family'*:

> *"Typical, like 9 to 5 families, families with two parents at home, both working full-time jobs, car on the drive, that sort of thing" (London, street sleeping, not working)*

This is also potentially alienating to people who would not consider themselves to be part of a 'family'. The term *'family'* resonated with some participants, but for others, particularly single men or non-primary carers of children, the term can become a distraction from the message. This was because it was felt to exclude certain types of people who did not identify as a family or a typical family unit. One man responded to campaign materials with:

> *"It's all families, but I'm not a family!" (London, street sleeping, not working)*

Participants reacted positively to the use of the term '*complex'*, including in the phrase '*complex and vulnerable'.* Participants often saw the multifaceted nature of their situation, or of others' they knew, encapsulated in this term. This was particularly the case amongst participants who themselves had complex, overlapping needs. For example, a participant from London who cares full time for her disabled son saw her role as a mother and a carer experiencing homelessness reflected in this phrase. Others saw *complex and vulnerable* as referring to mental illness, addiction or other disabilities. Even those who did not identify as having complex needs themselves interpreted this phrase to mean quite specific things, including mental health, addiction, or disability:

> *"That's a slightly more PC way of saying people with mental health and addiction problems" (London, temporary accommodation, working)*

The word *'complex'* or the phrase *'complex and vulnerable'* acted as an empty signifier for this group, with people inferring their own complex circumstances into the term, or projecting those of others, without the phrase itself actually needing to be specific. The responses to this phrase suggest that these terms may have broad appeal in communications. There is not a standard when it comes to housing struggles and homelessness. To maximise appeal language and communications should reflect this complexity in discussion.

4.4 Using language which feels specific but is open for people to read multiple meanings into it

Some of terms tested were felt to be too generic or too broad, such as *'disadvantaged people'* or *'ordinary families'*. Participants preferred language that felt specific to particular stories or resonated with their particular experience. Some phrases were empty signifiers, meaning they perceived to be specific, even if they were in fact quite broad, as participants could easily project their own meaning. For example, 'complex' (see above) or '*hidden homeless'.* The term was particularly resonant with participants because it was felt to reflect the actual lived experiences of struggling with housing and becoming homeless. This was a view shared by people who experienced homelessness and those who had not.

This term resonated as it allowed people to read multiple meanings into the term. There were three interpretations of *'hidden homeless'* shared. The first was people that would not necessarily see themselves as homeless. This term challenges a narrow understanding of what it means to be homeless by having people think beyond street sleeping and include other forms such as sofa surfing. One woman in Manchester explained how she saw her homelessness:

> *"In a way, I am. People wouldn't realise that I technically haven't got a house to live and I'm going from one to another." (Manchester, sofa surfing, working)*

The second interpretation is from the perspective of people who acknowledged their or another person's homelessness. For example, one participant interpreted hidden homeless to mean being physically hidden or out of the way. For him this resonated as he was 'living on the streets' but chose to sleep in an abandoned car on a back street. While he recognised his homelessness, this term felt more specific and resonant as it challenges stereotypical images around the term *'homeless'*. For participants, it feels like less of a label and free of stereotypes.

Finally, people also saw the term referring to homelessness being politically 'hidden'. There was a feeling among many participants who were currently or had experience of homelessness that the government did not do enough to support them and others in similar situations. People felt invisible to a system that did not provide them with the support they needed:

> *"Hidden homeless is not being seen, not being seen, [not] get[ting] any help." (London, temporary accommodation, not working)*

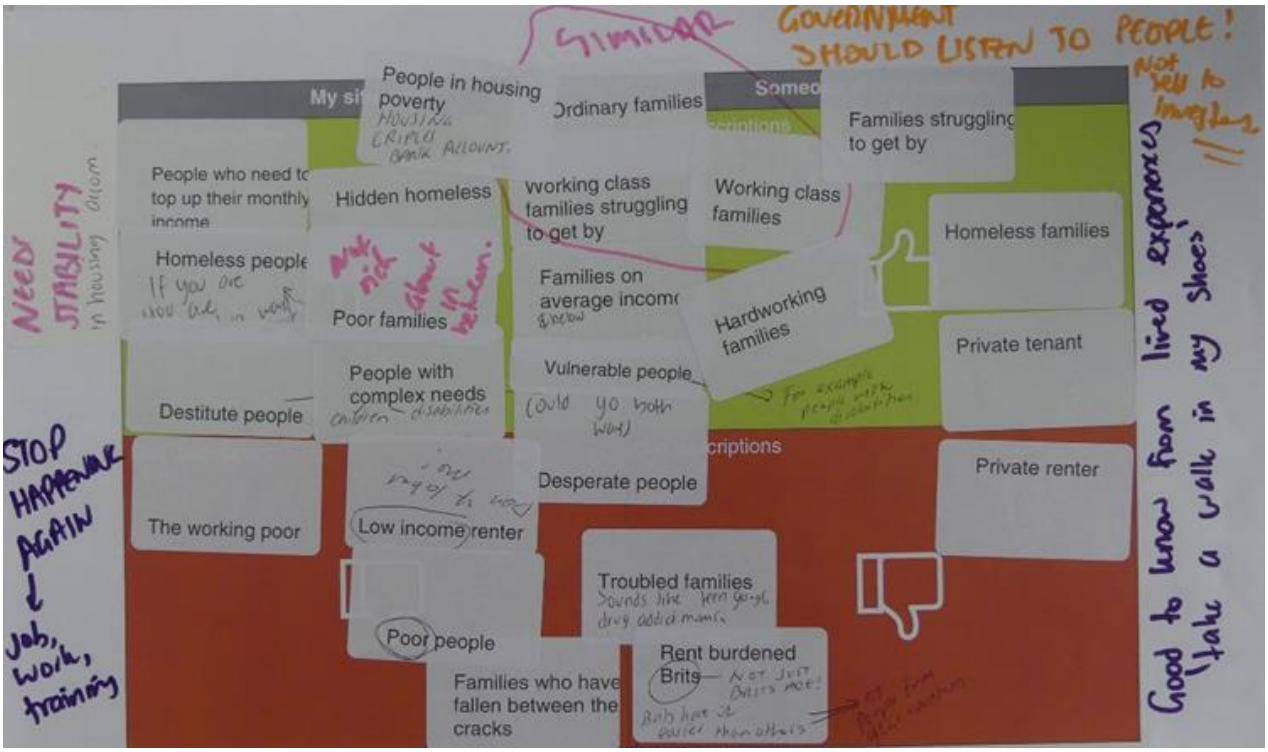
Because this term was open to multiple interpretations, it resonated with people who recognised themselves as homeless to varying degrees and were in a range of situations. The term 'hidden homeless' is used by

charities to refer mainly to a specific group of people not caught by state support. However, a wider group of people were able to see their own situation in the term. It also appeared that the term *'hidden homeless'* could prompt people to reflect on their own situation and to recognise their situation as one of homelessness, when they had not before. Difficult housing situations can become normalised. This term appeared to be able to challenge these norms.

4.5 Avoiding 'troubled' and 'chaotic'

Participants saw the terms '*troubled families'* and '*chaotic'* as negative stereotypes, linked to particular and often pejorative social narratives around drug addiction, alcoholism and teenage parents. There was a sense that these were loosely coded terms contained implicit moral judgement that risked offending or alienating people. The use of this kind of language was also seen to inhibit personal agency to improve situations. For example, the phrase *'chaotic lives'* was perceived to be reductive of personal situations, inaccurate, and not applicable. In contrast, people saw *'complex lives'* as specific, tied to people's personal situations, and non-judgemental. Whereas the former implied people have lost control of their situation, the latter acknowledged that situations are difficult without attaching moral judgement to people's ability to cope or manage their lives. Ultimately, the most resonant language concentrated on people's personal situations rather than to their identity.

Figure 3: An example of completed stimulus showing responses to specific terminology



5. Differences in responses by audiences

Key findings
• Participants in the North of England and Scotland are more likely to respond positively to language referring to working class narratives or hard graft • Participant's roles as a mother or partner influenced their perceptions of terminology • Shelter clients may have been more likely to have sought help than other groups, and reflect this in their language preferences

Not everyone in the research had the same responses to the phrases and messages used. In this section we discuss how views differed according to regional location, gender, housing status and participants' previous experience with Shelter.

Table 4: Summary of reactions to language discussed which varied by region during interviews

Language where resonance varied by region	
Language which particularly resonated in the North of England and Scotland	• Rent burdened Brits • Struggling families • Working class families • Working families • Hardworking families

5.1 Regional differences

Fieldwork was conducted in four different locations across England and Scotland. Terms like '*working class'* and '*hard graft'* appeared to resonate most strongly with participants interviewed in Manchester and Scotland, who perhaps felt more connected to a working class identity than others in the south of England. One male participant from Glasgow said that his family and friends would describe him as *"A hard worker, he puts the effort in".* A young father in Glasgow (who worked in manual labour) summarised his response to the phrase:

> *"Hard graft, it's language that working class people will understand" (Glasgow, living with partner, working)*

For him, and others in these regions, this phrase resonated with their experiences and identity as working class. For other communities where people do not identify as working class or feel they have the same history of low paid hard labour these labels felt passive and did not speak to people's aspirations to improve their personal situations.

5.2 Gendered experiences

Women in the sample had unique experiences of housing struggles and their responses to the campaign materials reflected this. Their roles as a mother or partner influenced their perceptions of terminology. Some of the women we spoke with were more likely to speak 'positively' about homelessness, especially if they had taken 'active steps' to become homeless in order to leave a worse situation. A mother in Glasgow explained to us how she became homeless:

> *"I was forced to move in with my Mum… When I spilt up with the father of the children…I was forced to move out for my own safety, to my mother's. I suppose I was 'homeless'... It is a low point in your life, although it is not your own fault. I couldn't stay in my own home. It wasn't safe. I was struggling. I had twins. It was really hard..." (Glasgow, previously homeless, not working)*

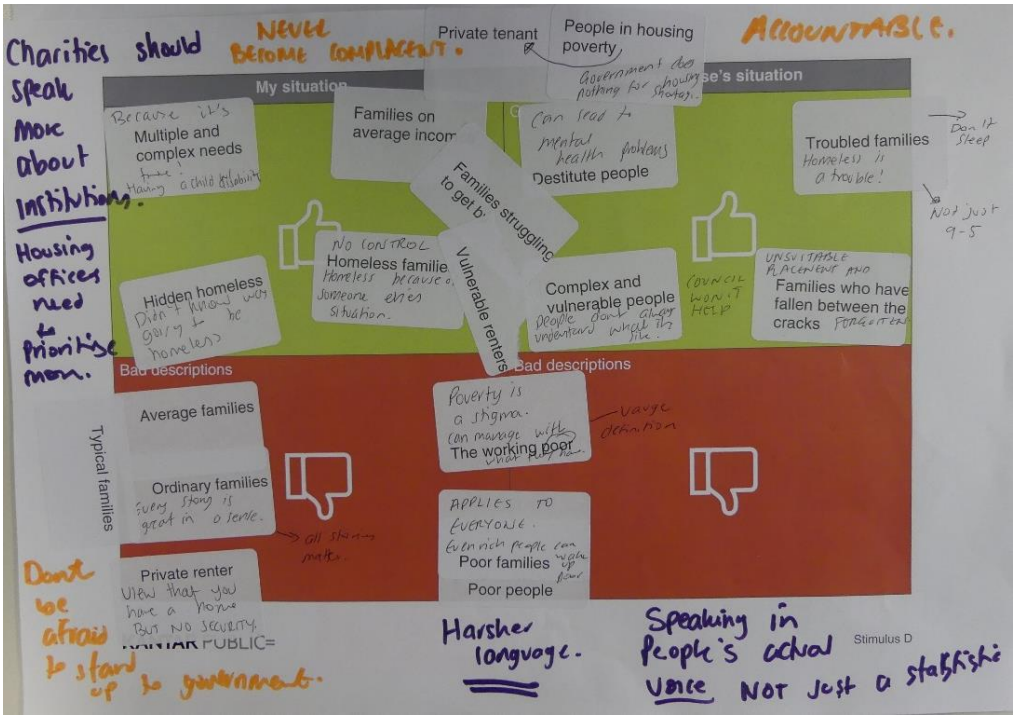
For her and others it was important to reflect this positive, active act when speaking about homelessness. As discussed above, language that felt passive or portrayed individuals as weak was thought to devalue and misrepresent their experiences.

Men and women sometimes had different reactions to the use of the term 'family'. The term *'family'* was an emotive one. For people with children, language around families was meaningful and relevant when describing their housing issues. As discussed above, however, some male participants felt it was exclusionary. Negative reactions to the use of the term 'families' was compounded by perceptions of unfairness around securing housing support. Some men interviewed felt that it was more difficult for single men to get the housing support they needed compared to 'families'. Some reported feeling *"victimised as a single male [by the system]".* Though these views tended to be held by men, it is possible that we would have heard similar views from single women - however these were less common in the sample.

5.3 Differences by housing status or previous experience of support

We did not find any clear differences between people in different types of housing. There were some differences between people who had previously sought support and those who had not. Clients of Shelter who had a positive and in depth experience with the charity appeared to prefer active and direct language such as *'families who have fallen through the cracks'* or *'people in housing poverty'*, which they felt reflected their views and experiences as opposed to generic terms like *'typical families'* or *'rent burdened Brits'*. This may be because Shelter clients may have been more active in navigating the system as they have sought support and advocacy from third parties. It may be to reflect a feeling they can take agency over their situations,

Figure 4: An example of completed stimulus showing responses to specific terminology



6. Conclusions and recommendations

The findings of this research suggest that the current language used by anti-poverty organisations is not found to be overtly offensive or patronising by those it describes, with the possible exception of phrases that suggested stereotypes such as *'troubled/chaotic families'*. However, language could be tweaked to better resonate with the people it refers to, and to better reflect their experiences.

Participants preferred communications that linked housing issues to circumstances rather than to them as individuals, reinforcing that homelessness is due to external and structural factors - rather than the fault of those experiencing it. For example, *'struggling to get by'* felt specific to a situation, and did not link housing or homelessness to someone's identity. Language that acknowledged the diversity of people and their situations reflected people's experiences. On the other hand, words like '*typical'* or '*average'* rarely resonated, as they felt overly broad or generic, inadequately representing the complexity of people's circumstances. Linked to this, participants disliked any words that felt like 'labels', such as *'poor'* or *'destitute'*. The passivity implied in these terms was seen to disregard the active struggle many had engaged in to negotiate the housing system and ultimately seek a better situation for themselves. People's views also differed by a number of other factors. Gender, whether they had sought support from charities and regional location all played a role in the way people responded to communications.

Language that best resonated with participants was thus situational and transitional, representing poverty, homelessness or housing struggles as an experience and not as something tied to identity. When done well, this language acknowledges the complexity of people's personal or housing situations yet remains open for interpretation: allowing people to read multiple meanings into the terminology.

Across the research, there was a great deal of support for the use of the term *'hidden homeless'*. We suggest its effectiveness lies in its resonance with people's actual experience of homelessness, its potential to prompt others struggling with housing costs to recognise their situation and in its ability to shift the nature of public discourse on homelessness, raising awareness of multiple forms of homelessness. Whilst '*homelessness'* was not necessarily disliked, the term 'hidden homeless' felt more nuanced, and an opportunity to use language with less stigma and fixed ideas associated with it. Discussions about hidden homelessness suggest that this kind of narrative can help shift public perceptions of homelessness and affect those experiencing these forms of homelessness to recognise this and encourage them to seek support.

Overall, our recommendations for terminology that resonates with people experiencing poverty, homelessness or housing need are summarised below:

- Terms that link housing struggles to situations rather than individual people or their identity, by avoiding the use of labels (e.g. using terms like 'destitute', 'the poor' etc.
- Refer to specific struggles that people may recognise, avoiding the use of broad or generic terms
- Express the agency and actions of individuals rather than presenting them as passive victims
- Allow people to infer or project their own circumstances and experiences (e.g. by using the term 'complex')
- Consider targeting specific regional and cultural narratives about work

- Consider individuals' gendered experiences of the system, taking care that when talking about families, different types of family are represented
- Consider that when people speak universally (ie 'it could happen to anyone') they are speaking from their lived experience of the world. Homelessness and housing struggles are a reality to whole communities rather than individuals. With this in mind, reinforce the message that housing struggles or homelessness can happen to anyone and challenge the normalised nature of difficult housing situations.

Future campaigns could consider reflecting back people's own perceptions as far as possible, rather than using language that is technically accurate but does not resonate. For policy makers, grounding discourse in people's self-perceptions will demonstrate sensitivity and include the perspectives and voices of people who live the issues discussed.

Appendix A – Topic Guide

Key principles for researchers to follow throughout fieldwork

This guide is intended to be used with a variety of individuals with both varying housing situations and perceptions of their experiences. It does not include follow-up questions like 'why', 'when', 'how', etc. as participants' contributions will be fully explored in response to what they tell us throughout in order to understand how and why views and opinions have arisen. The order in which issues are addressed and the amount of time spent on different themes will vary between interviews but the key areas for discussion are the same.

The subject of poverty and housing stress is a sensitive issue which could make participants feel vulnerable. While all participants will identify as struggling to pay housing costs there is no common language to describe this. Researchers will be mindful of this and led by the language used by participants – echoing their own experiences and only presenting alternatives as part of the communications testing.

Please use the information from the screener to get an appreciation of the participant's current housing and financial situation interview.

Questioning and probing will be framed to ensure we understand participants' situations as they view them. Researchers will adapt the approach, as much as possible, to suit the needs of each participant.

Equipment: Digital recorder and directional microphone or omni-microphone recorder, coloured felt tips, stimulus pack, incentives, audio guide

Stimulus	**Details**
Stimulus A	Participant description grid – self generated words
Stimulus B	Sticker pack – blank to fill out
Stimulus C	Example campaign materials
Stimulus D	Participant description grid – list of terms
Stimulus E	Sticker pack - list of terms used to describe

1. Introduction to the research (3 mins)
   - **Introduce yourself**: Kantar Public – independent research company

- **Introduce research and purpose of the interview** – research on behalf of Shelter to hear your thoughts on the ways in which charities talk about people who may be struggling to pay their housing costs or are homeless.
- **Reassurances** – Not a test, no right or wrong answers, a conversation not a survey; we are simply asking for people's views and opinions; comfort – let me know if you'd like a break at any time
- **MRS guidelines** – your right to anonymity and confidentiality; voluntary informed consent and participation
- **Go through graded consent**
    - the **interview will be recorded so that researchers do not have to make notes** during the interview and can listen back when analysing the data. The recorder is encrypted and only the research team will have access to the recordings
    - the interview recording **may be used in a final audio visual presentation to be used by Shelter** at conferences to 'bring to life' your story. While we will not use your name your voice may be recognisable. Shelter will own and be able to use the videos in presentations on the research findings but will not use it for commercial purposes such as advertising and on TV
    - **voluntary** and **optional**
- **Length** – the interview will last up to 45 mins
- **Incentive** – £40 voucher as a thank you for taking part, £10 cash for travel
- Any questions/concerns?

Start recording – acknowledge participant consent for being recorded

TEST AUDIO EQUIPMENT before beginning interview – see microphone guide

2. Introduction to participants (10 mins)

Section aim: *To warm up and build rapport with participant/s and understand their situation and experiences relating to housing.*

NOTE TO RESEARCHERS – please focus initially on general experiences and struggles before discussing current and past housing specifically.

- **Ask participant/s to introduce themselves**:
  - Name
  - IF PAIRED – introduce each other to researcher

- **Ask participant/s to talk through their pre interview photos**:
  [If participant/s have not completed activity talk through what they would have done. *E.g. what does your home/ place where are staying look like?*]
  - **Your home/place you're staying:** What does it make you think of? How long have you lived/stayed there? Who do you live with/who else is there? Your day to day struggles?
  - **Your local area or outside your home:** What does it make you think of? How long have you known the area?
  - **The selfie**: What do you think of your selfie? Does this image reflect how you see yourself? Facial expression? Clothing? Probe on how they were feeling or what they think about when they look at this selfie with a focus on their day to day life/struggles
  - **Something that made you smile:** Explain the moment. Was it a regular or a one off moment?
  - **Something that frustrated you:** Explain the moment. Was it a regular or a one off moment?

- IF NOT COVERED ALREADY, relate back to images or prior discussion –
  - **Current and past housing**:
    - How would they describe their current housing situation? RESEARCHER – use Stimulus A
    - IF HOMELESS IN THE PAST (from screener) – how does your current experience compare to when you were previously homeless?
    - Feelings towards current housing situation
  - **To what degree is general financial struggles a part of their lives**: Central challenge? A small worry? What about housing costs specifically?
  - **Time spent worrying about housing**

- IF PAIRED –
  - Similarities and differences in **experiences**.
  - Similarities/differences in **perceptions** of each other's experiences
  - **Do they discuss worries/frustrations around housing and household finances together?**
  - **Sources of support**

3. Description of situation by friends, family, government and charities (10 mins)

Section aim: *To understand how participants perceive current descriptions of housing and homelessness in their personal context*

- **How do you think others might describe their housing situation and financial struggles?**
  RESEARCHER – record key description words on stickers (Stimulus B) and fill out Stimulus A
  - In general
  - How might **friends and family** describe?
  - How might **government** describe?

- RESEARCHER – Annotate using coloured pens on Stimulus A with participants focusing on their **views on the descriptions**:
  - experiences/situations where they've been described,
  - positive or negative sentiment towards description

- **Repeat section focusing specifically on charities if not covered already**

4. Campaigns describing housing and homelessness (2 mins)

Section aim: *To briefly introduce housing and homelessness campaigns and set the scene for a deeper analysis into the language used*

- IF NOT ALREADY MENTIONED – **Have you ever seen any campaigns on homelessness and housing issues?**
  - Describe what they **saw**
  - **Views towards campaign**: what do they think about the campaign? Good/bad?
  - **Applicability**: Does it apply to them? Does it apply to others?
  - **Impact/resonance of campaign on them**

5. The campaign material (15 mins)

Section aim: *To introduce the campaign materials and understand participants perceptions towards the overall campaign and specific language used*

- Introduce **Stimulus C** as an example campaign talking about housing: *"These are excerpts/terms taken from a wide range of campaigns across the UK around housing and homelessness and we're interested in hearing your thoughts on the language they use"*

  - **Initial thoughts**
  - **Feelings towards**
    - What drives these feelings? Ask participants to talk through their rationale
  - Thoughts on the **language** and **description**

        - RESEARCHER – record any specific words mentioned on stickers (Stimulus B) and record on Stimulus D (Participant grids)

- Introduce Stimulus E (the list of terms) and discuss
    - **Most relevant** to their situation
    - **Least relevant** to their situation
    - **Positive** words
    - **Negative** words
    - Situations words might be **appropriate** or **inappropriate**
    - Who do these words apply to?
    - Any other thoughts

RESEARCHER – to use Stimulus D to place word stickers and annotate and record thoughts and sentiments throughout

6. Ways to describe in the future (5 mins)

Section aim: *To brainstorm future ways charities could describe people in similar situations to participants*

- **Overall thoughts** on the ways in which charities currently represent people who need housing support

RESEARCHER – to use and interact with completed stimulus grids and highlight using pens to summarise

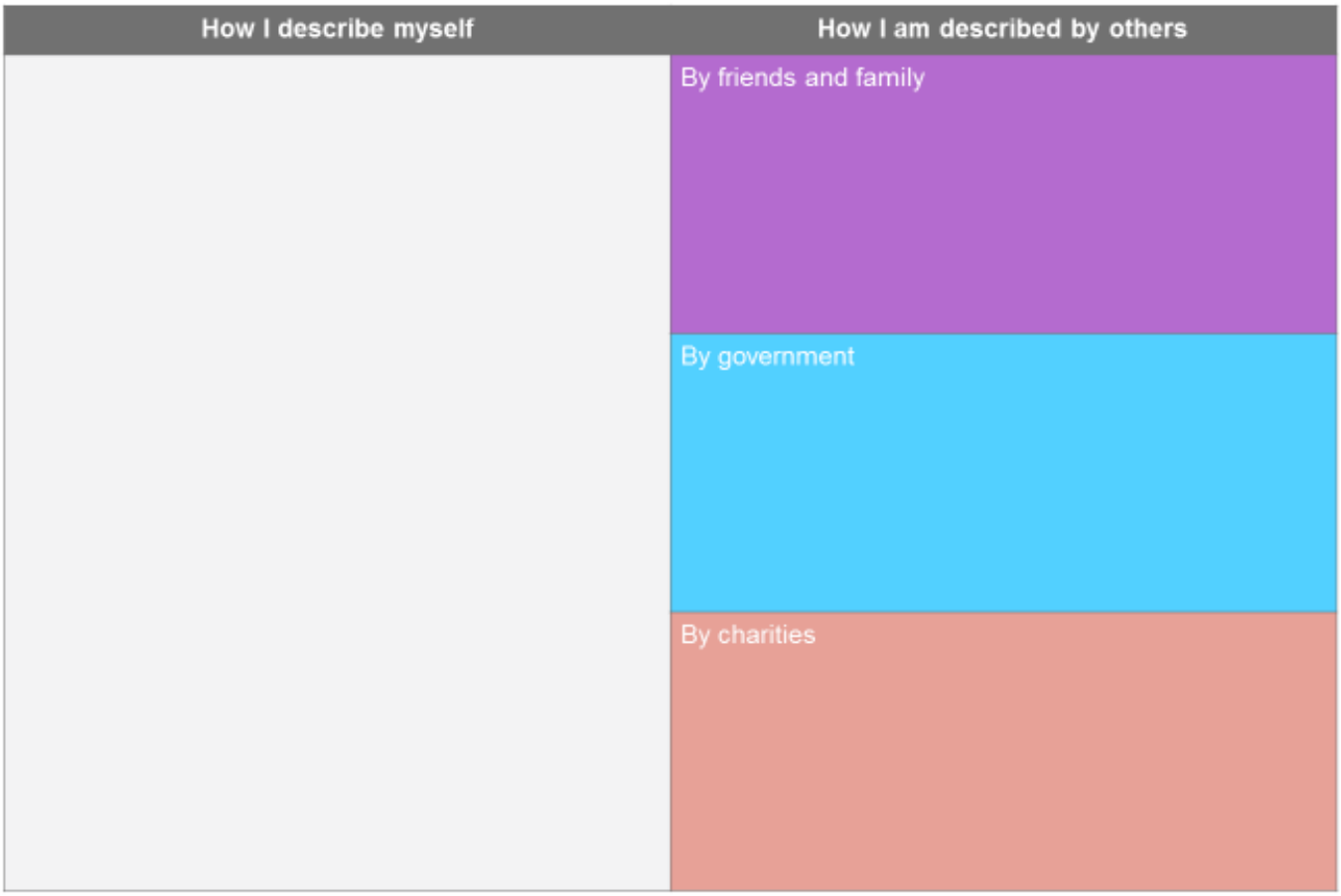
- **Best ways to describe in the future**
    - **Their** situation
    - People in **other similar housing situations**

7. Thank and close

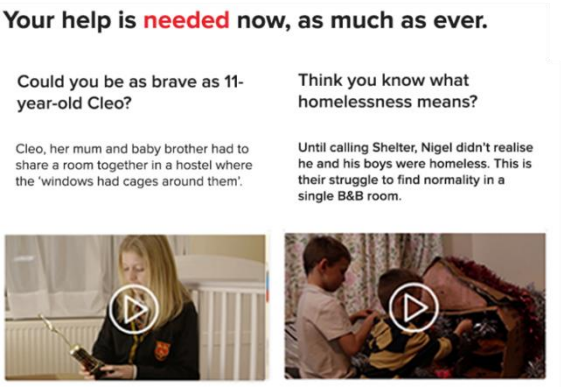
- Reconfirm **incentive** and **consent**
- If appropriate signpost appropriate charities or agencies for support for issues touched on throughout interview

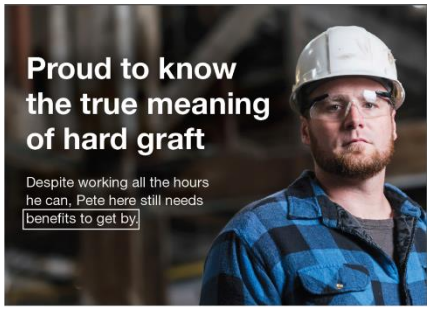
Appendix B – Interview stimulus

Stimulus A – participant description grid

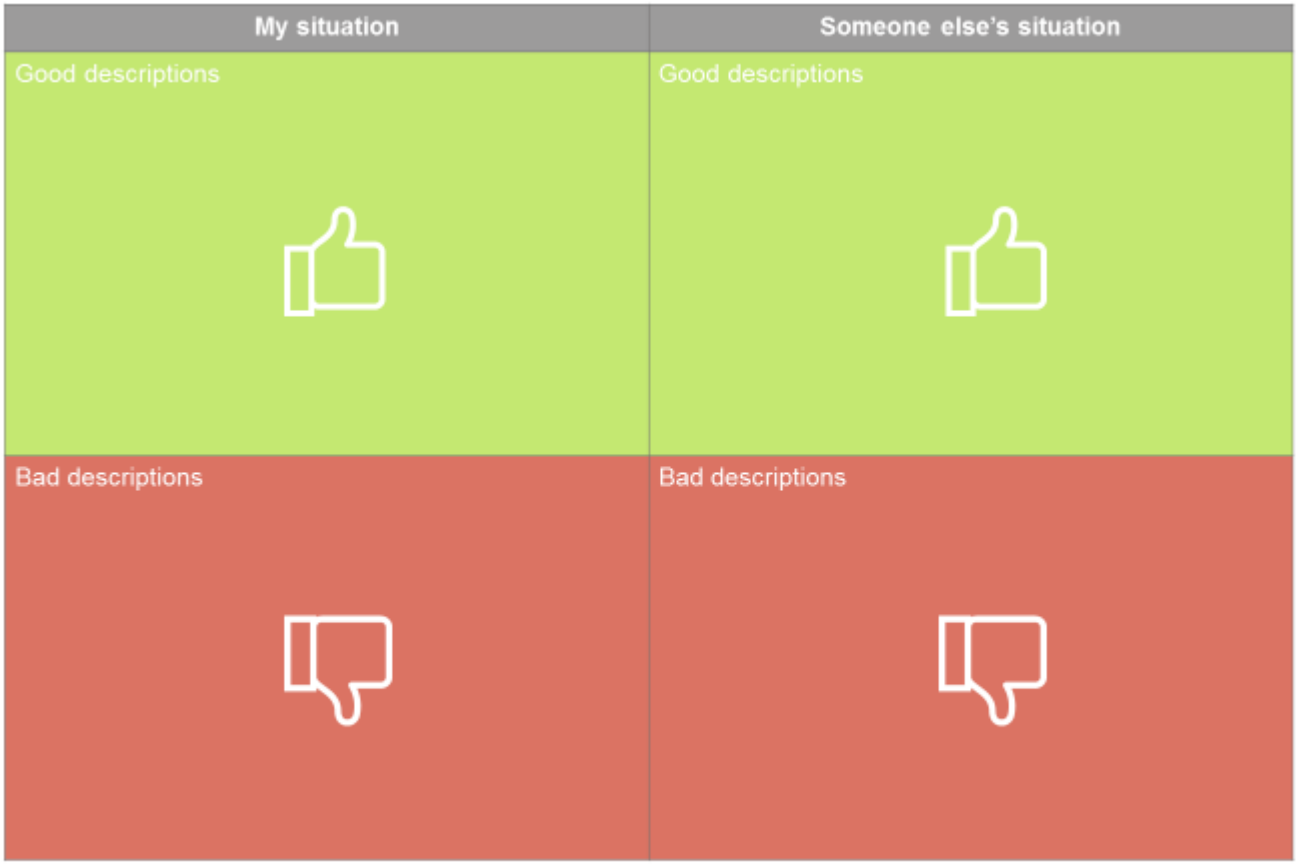


Stimulus C – example campaign materials





Stimulus D – participant terminology sorting grid



Stimulus E - List of terms

Terms were presented on label paper

- Vulnerable people
- Vulnerable renters
- Destitute people
- Desperate people
- hardest-to-help
- hard to reach people
- disadvantaged people
- troubled families
- people with complex needs
- families who have fallen between the cracks
- chaotic lives
- multiple and complex needs
- complex and vulnerable people
- Ordinary families
- Hardworking families
- Hard pressed families
- Typical families
- Just about managing families
- Just managing families
- average families
- families on typical incomes
- Homeless families
- Homeless people
- Hidden homeless
- private tenant
- private renter
- Rent burdened Brits
- People in housing poverty
- Low income families
- People in housing need
- People in poverty
- Poor people
- Poor families
- The working poor
- People who need to top up their monthly income
- working families
- low income renter
- struggling families
- families struggling to get by
- working families struggling to get by
- families on average incomes

Appendix C – Achieved sample

Primary quotas						
			London	**Manchester**	**Plymouth/ Helston**	**Glasgow**
Location	**London**		8			
	Manchester			15		
	Helston				13	
	Glasgow					10
Housing status	**GROUP 1**		4	4	4	2
	Anyone currently or recently homeless (within 3 years)					
	Struggling with housing costs and on a low income	**GROUP 2**	3	8	5	4
		Working				
		GROUP 3	5	7	8	6
		Not working				
Household mix	No dependents (Single)		2	5	7	3
	Dependents		6	10	6	7

Secondary quotas

		London	Manchester	Plymouth/ Helston	Glasgow
Age	18-24		1	2	
	25-34	2	4	4	2
	35-49	6	6	3	6
	50+		4	4	2
Gender	Male	3	7	6	5
	Female	5	8	6	5
	Trans man				
	Trans woman				
	Transgender			1	
	In another way:_____				
	Prefer not to say				
Sexual orientation	1. / Heterosexual/straight	8	15	12	10
	2. 2: Gay				
	3. 4: Lesbian				
	4. 3: Bisexual			1	
	5. 6: Asexual				
	6. 7: In another way:_____				
	7. 8: Prefer not to say				
Disability status	Yes	1	5	3	3
	No	7	10	10	7