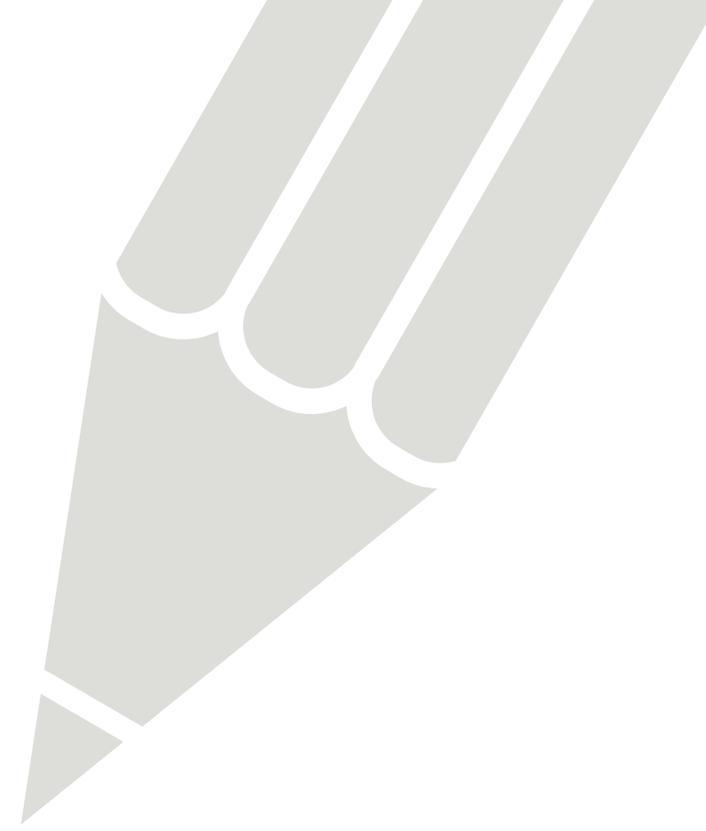


**TELLING  
A BETTER  
STORY  
ABOUT  
CHARITIES**

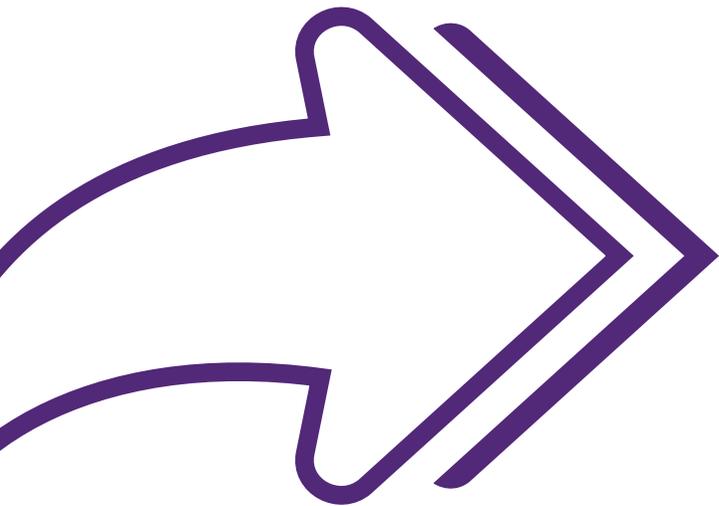
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# ABOUT THIS GUIDE

**This guide is a tool for charities to help inform responses to charity issues that the public are concerned about.**



In recent years, charities have faced questions over the way they operate. Executive pay, fundraising methods and governance all been scrutinised. This has created a renewed public discourse about how charities operate as institutions, rather than on what they achieve.

This is understandable, given both the recent events that have exposed weaknesses in some charities, and the ever-growing scale and influence of the sector. As significant institutions in society, it's right that charities are scrutinised.

It's important that charities do all they can to maintain their good reputations, in order to sustain public trust and be able to continue their work. Charities should and have been dealing with the roots of these problems where they exist. But as well as working to ever higher standards in their governance and operations, charities also need to be able to tell the positive story about themselves as effectively as possible.

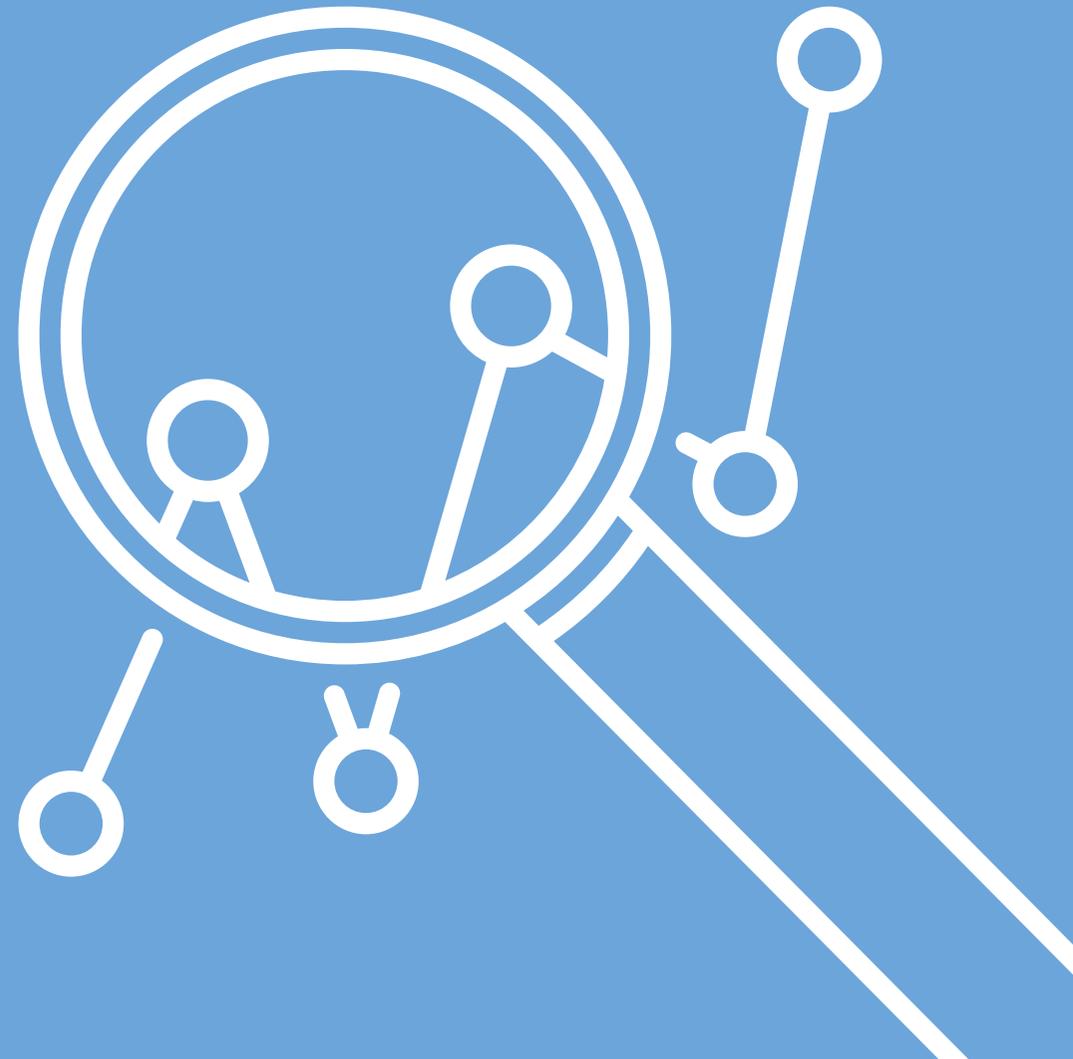
We worked with a research agency, BritainThinks, to draw out key themes in how charities work that appeal to the public and find out how to present them most positively.

We also tested reactive messages on some of the questions asked of charities in areas such as governance, transparency and fundraising. The aim of the research was to see what messaging was most effective in allaying people's concerns. We've presented the findings in this guide.

It's worth underlining that actions speak louder than words and the advice in this guide is intended to be complementary to taking clear steps to address issues the public are concerned about, not an alternative to doing so. Communications alone are not enough – we need to 'show, not tell' the public that we take their concerns seriously.

Charity communicators have a really important role to play here in helping their organisations understand the wider environment and the importance of meeting public expectations. We hope you find the guide useful and that it helps you think about how to present your charity's work most positively and deal with questions about how you work.

# RESEARCH INSIGHTS



**Our research with the public identified some clear key insights into what charities need to do to help restore public trust. These have been used to help develop key messages about charities, and the responses to critical questions section later in this guide.**

- 1 **Acknowledge concerns**
- 2 **Be transparent in a proactive, accessible way**
- 3 **Give examples of behavioural change**
- 4 **Demonstrate collective impact**
- 5 **Don't use facts and figures to make your case**
- 6 **Use simple, personable language, not 'management speak'**

### 1 Acknowledge concerns

The research identified a series of concerns about charities. These include:

- excessive executive pay
- questions around how much of people's donation goes on frontline services
- the impact of the charity and the perceived lack of progress on its given issue area
- fundraising methods which are aggressive, invasive or exploitative.

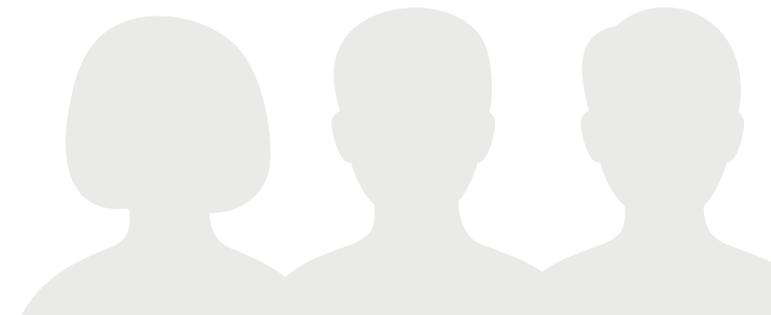
On some issues, such as fundraising methods, concerns had been created through personal experience. Almost everyone who participated in the focus groups had a negative experience with charity fundraising that they saw as aggressive, invasive, exploitative, or all three. Recent media coverage has therefore confirmed these concerns, rather than created them. Our research found that charity supporters were particularly frustrated by what they saw as poor behaviour by charities. Admitting mistakes is crucial to earning a hearing from these audiences.



It's important that concerns are acknowledged and addressed before trying to engage audiences with narrative about the positive role charities play. You need to show that you 'get it'.

Adopting a defensive tone or failing to acknowledge concerns will turn audiences off.

**Media coverage has confirmed concerns, not created them.**



## 2 Be transparent in a proactive, accessible way

The public have strongly voiced concerns about how their money is being spent, specifically how much of it is spent 'on the front line' versus what they have come to perceive as grandiose offices, large expense accounts and excessive senior salaries. Underlying this is a deeper concern about the impact charities are really having. Charity supporters and non-supporters alike are concerned that charities are not making a difference, and accusations that charities are not transparent are one manifestation of this.

Charities need to reassure the public that transparency is a core priority for them and then back this up with tangible steps to demonstrate this.

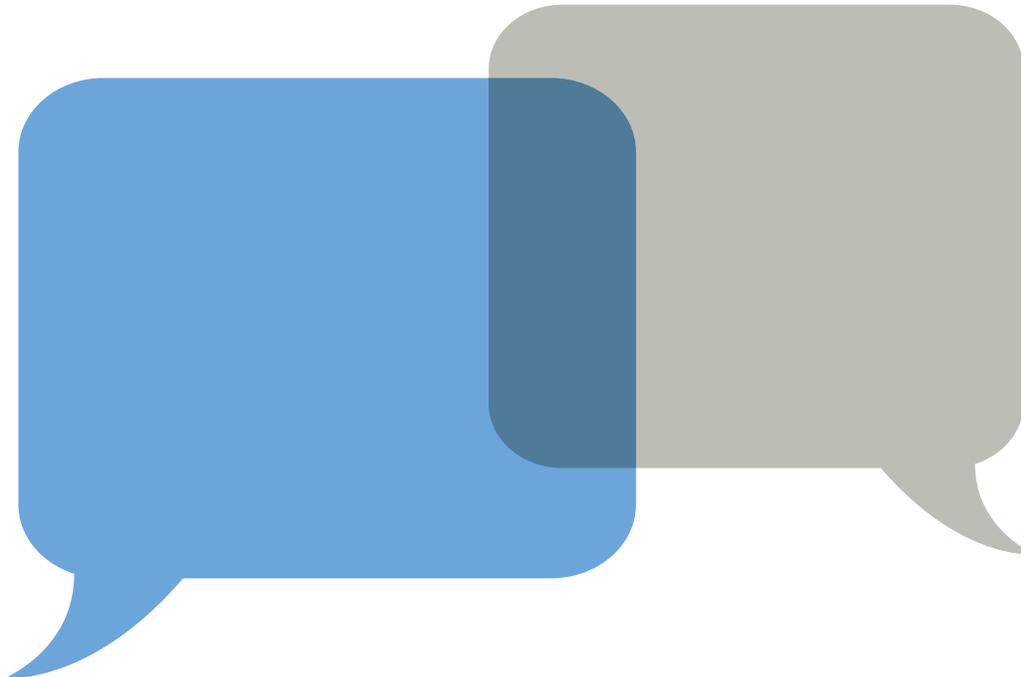
**Charities need to reassure the public that transparency is a core priority for them and then back this up with tangible steps to demonstrate this.**

## 3 Give examples of behavioural change

Where possible, provide examples of changes you've made in areas the public are concerned about. This demonstrates that you are not trying to 'spin' your way through a problem, but you fully understand and are prepared to make concrete changes.

## 4 Demonstrate collective impact

Negative media coverage tarnishes the sector as a whole, potentially more so than the individual charities any piece of coverage names. We should make use of any opportunities to make a positive case about the role and achievements of the sector. It's in all our interests to reinforce positive messages about the charity sector.



### 5 Don't just rely on facts and figures to make your case

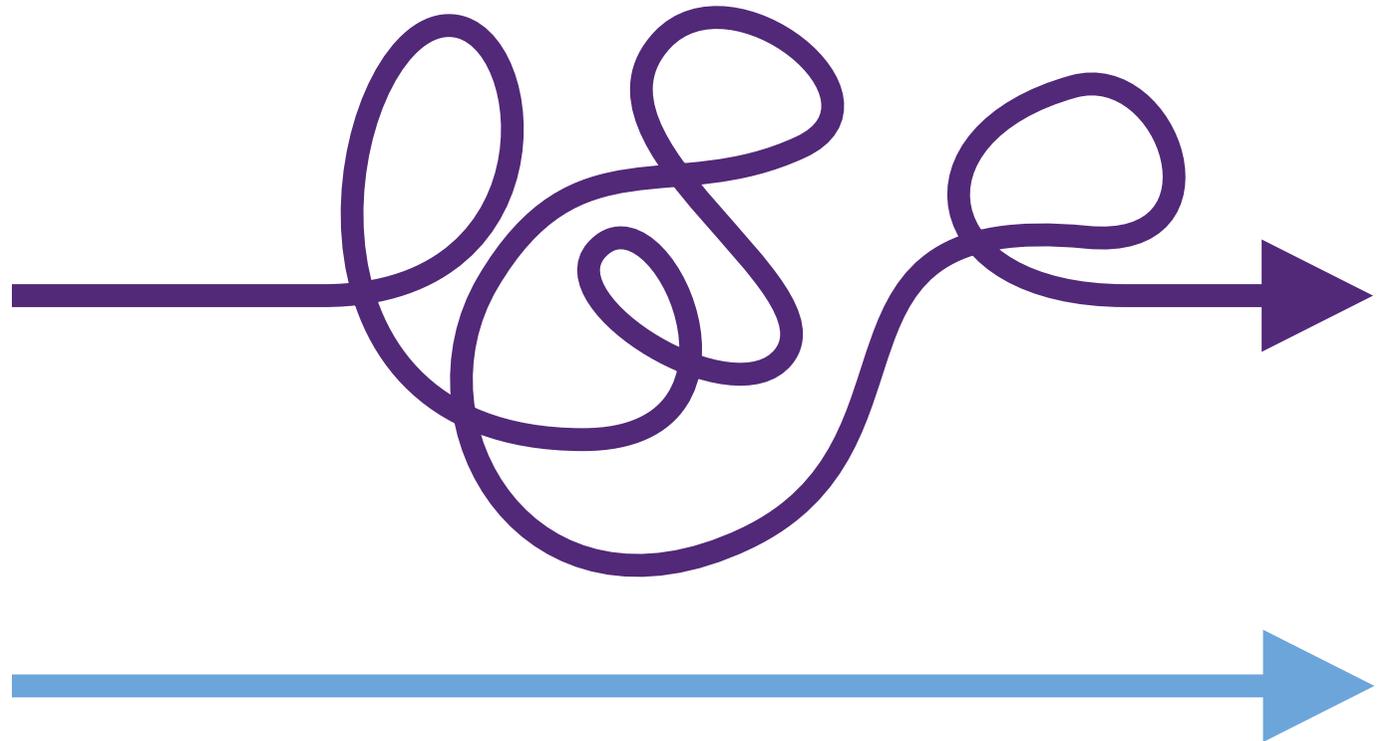
Time and time again, what we feel are 'killer stats' fall flat with the public – an insight re-confirmed during this research. Statistics are distrusted and picked apart, particularly if they run counter to someone's existing point of view. Bringing to life what you are saying with examples or case studies has far more impact.

Where you do use statistics, do so sparingly and in a simple way that relates directly to the impact on people's lives.

**Statistics are distrusted and picked apart, particularly if they run counter to someone's existing point of view.**

### 6 Use simple, personable language, not 'management speak'

A clear message from the research was that verbose or complex phrases do not resonate well. They can be confusing and they also create a sense of distance, speaking to the idea of charities as big businesses, out of touch with charity values. Language should always be as clear and as simple as possible, written as you would say it to a friend. Using a warm and understanding tone works better than cold, defensive language.



# RESPONSES TO CRITICAL QUESTIONS

This section offers guidance for responding to some of the critical questions frequently asked about charities. These messages were developed by communications experts in a range of charities using insight from the qualitative research, and then tested and refined via a second set of focus groups. They're outlines and you'll need to adapt them to suit your organisation.



## Why are charity executives paid high salaries?

### INSIGHT

- The public accept the need for charity chief executives to be paid but feel that some salaries are too high.
- The role of charity chief executive is felt to be a public service role, so many feel that it is *already expected* that a pay cut would be taken when moving from the corporate sector, and reiterating it does little to move people.
- Part of what would make levels of pay acceptable is the knowledge that the chief executive is accountable, or that their pay is performance-related. Even where pay is not performance-related, emphasising accountability is helpful, particularly accountability to a board of volunteers.

### → RESPONSE

We completely understand that donors want us to run as efficiently as possible. We need experienced staff to run effectively, and we need to be able to attract those staff.

An experienced charity executive makes sure that the charity spends its money effectively, makes the difference it is trying to, and accounts to donors and the public for what it spends.

Our senior staff are accountable to an independent board of volunteers who make sure that they are getting value for money. These volunteers decide what pay is fair based on skills, experience, and performance in the job.

Because being transparent is important to us, we've set out the full details of what our senior staff are paid, and how those sums were decided at, on our website.

**NB** NCVO recommends that charities set out the details of senior executive pay and how it is set in an accessible place. This helps explain how salaries are arrived at and demonstrates a commitment to transparency. Read more in the report of the inquiry into charity senior executive pay ([PDF](#)).

## Is my donation all spent on administration?

### INSIGHT

- The public accept that charities need to spend money on operational costs and salaries.
- However, they want reassurance that this is done as prudently as possible so that money is focused on the front line.
- Reminding people of different kinds of frontline roles helps to remind them of the impact that charities make.

### → RESPONSE

Some essentials – such as an office, computers, transport, insurance and proper accounting – are necessary to run any effective organisation.

Charities spend as prudently as possible here so they can focus their income on their issue or cause.

In most cases, spending on salaries is paying for front-line staff such as care workers, debt advisors, animal protection officers or medical researchers who are absolutely critical to a charity achieving what it sets out to do.

Charities want to spend as much as they can on the front-line, but need to spend some money on the things that ensure they're being effective, such as good management and accounting. This makes sure that every pound is spent as effectively as possible.

More information about how we spend our money is available on our website.

## Why do charities hound people for money, particularly vulnerable groups like the elderly?

### INSIGHT

- People accept that charities need to fundraise. But they remain concerned about some of the methods used.
- The public are looking for clear, simple pledges. ('We won't do this', 'we always do this'.)
- Proactively encouraging people to contact the regulator if they are concerned does show that charities are taking concerns seriously.
- Though we need to be careful when talking about the regulator and the code of fundraising practice as it can be hard for some people to understand. People understand better if you talk about the specific things which are or aren't allowed.

### → RESPONSE

Charities only make the difference they do because of the public's generous support. We know that there have been times where charities have fallen short of their own standards in fundraising and they are working to put it right.

Many charities have made significant changes to the way they fundraise. Some charities have moved to 'opt-in' only models of consent for contacting donors, others are reviewing their practices and processes to make sure they are in line with what donors expect.

Charities are keeping a much closer eye on any companies carrying out fundraising on their behalf.

Because charities collectively know how important following high standards is, they have set up a new fundraising regulator with strong powers to take action against any charities that break the rules.

The code of fundraising practice, the rule book on fundraising that charities sign up to, has been toughened up including the banning of selling data and new measures to protect more vulnerable individuals.

We urge anyone who has had a bad experience with fundraising to contact us, because we want to know and make sure it's put right. You can also contact the new regulator, the Fundraising Regulator, on 0300 999 3407 or [www.fundraisingregulator.org.uk](http://www.fundraisingregulator.org.uk).



## Why do charities campaign against the government – they shouldn't be political?

### INSIGHT

- Despite some attempts to precipitate concern about this, the issue has very little resonance with the public.
- The public's understanding of campaigning in general is limited.
- But people are supportive of the principle of charities highlighting issues that affect their beneficiaries, even if it would be challenging for politicians.

### → RESPONSE

Our campaigns are aimed at raising awareness of the issues facing the people we work for.

Charities can and do campaign for politicians to do things. In fact, sometimes campaigning for something might be the most effective way of a charity meeting its goals.

Charities are able to support specific policies. A health charity, for example, might campaign to improve certain aspects of healthcare. So, charities can run campaigns that are political in nature, because they're calling for specific policies, but they can't exist solely for political campaigning, and crucially, they mustn't ever be party political.

There are extensive rules set down by the Charity Commission on the detail of how charities can campaign. A charity's campaigns have to be in line with the things it is established for.

## Why do charities use negative advertising to make people feel guilty?

### INSIGHT

- Charity supporters accept the need for charities to show hard-hitting images.
- However, it's vital that these are balanced with images showing the positive impact donations are having, not just showing a problem but showing the solution, too.
- People are concerned if they think that distressing content is being shown when children may see it.

### → RESPONSE

Sometimes charity adverts can be hard-hitting, but charities are always conscious of the viewer and think carefully about what they air and when they air it. There are things happening in the world that people will feel uncomfortable about but part of charities' role is to show things as they are and to shed a light on difficult problems.

However, charities also make sure that they balance this with positive images of the people they help and show the difference that can be made.

Sometimes charity adverts can be hard-hitting, but charities are always conscious of the viewer and think carefully about what they air and when they air it.



## Why do charities spend so much on advertising?

### INSIGHT

- Charity supporters accept the need for charities to advertise as a way of raising awareness and bringing in new donors.
- People understand the phrase ‘raising awareness’ and think this is an important part of charities’ work.

### → RESPONSE

Charities only spend money on advertising if they think it will have a clear benefit in helping their cause. Some charity advertising campaigns are about raising awareness and promoting important information, such as how to spot someone having a stroke or how to keep your heart healthy. Others are aimed at helping to find new donors, which is vital for charities to continue their work.

## Why do charities have volunteers at the same time as paying big salaries to staff?

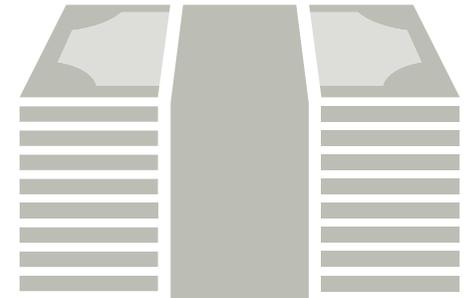
### INSIGHT

- Charity supporters accept the need for charities to involve volunteers.
- Positive language around the role of volunteers resonates with this audience, particularly as some are charity volunteers themselves.
- Acknowledging the role of individuals in what charities are able to achieve creates positivity.

### → RESPONSE

Volunteers often make a unique contribution – knowing a volunteer is giving up their time can make a real difference to someone a charity is helping. Volunteering for a charity is something people want to do – it’s their way of giving something back and making a difference and charities are incredibly grateful for their contribution.

But not all charities can run just with volunteers. Sometimes it’s necessary to have people who can work full time or who have specialist expertise that charities can’t always rely on finding through volunteers.



# A BETTER STORY: KEY MESSAGES



## The charity narrative

We worked to create a new narrative about charities, testing different ideas with the public. This helped us to identify themes that resonate with both charity supporters and the wider public.

The narrative is about the charity sector as a whole, rather than individual organisations. You should hear it reflected when representative bodies such as NCVO, ACEVO or the Institute of Fundraising talk about the sector. It won't work straight out of the box for every organisation, but you can draw on the themes in your messaging.

### What is a narrative?

A narrative sets out a story you want to tell – about yourself or about an issue. Although exact language and messaging will vary, an agreed narrative provides clarity and consistency across all external communications – from press releases and web copy, to meetings with stakeholders or social media content, ensuring that everyone is speaking from the same page.

## Themes that resonate with the public

The research identified core themes that resonated and worked to create a positive view of the sector.

### → Because of you

It's vital to communicate that charities recognise the central role that the public play, and that they are able to do what they do *because* of the support of their donors and the wider public. The phrase – 'because of you' performed strongly across all of the focus groups conducted as part of this project.

### → Confidence and reassurance

Both the wider public and charity supporters need to feel reassured that charities are listening to their concerns, and confident that action is being taken by charities to address them.

### → It's not just about the money

Focus group participants reacted strongly against any sense that giving to charity is only about money – underlined in part by their own dislike of persistent requests for donations. It's important to reference the variety of ways in which people can support you so they can see that you value other forms of support, such as giving time.

### → Impact

Talking about, and ideally evidencing, the impact charities have is vital to countering doubts that donations are making a difference.

## Key messages

Because of you, charities in the UK are making a difference to millions of lives in our country and across the world. They play a vital role in our society – and we all benefit.

→ **Because of you**  
→ **Impact**

That means being transparent about how donations are being spent and the impact they have made, responding to people's concerns and operating to the highest standards.

→ **Confidence and reassurance**

Every contribution, however big or small, matters. Whether volunteering, donating goods or money, sponsoring a friend in a marathon, attending a fundraising event, or spreading the word, charities harness people's individual goodwill and combine it with the professional expertise and vision of others to create the biggest possible impact. Together, it all adds up to a lot of change.

→ **It's not just about the money**  
→ **Impact**

Charities, and all that they achieve, only exist thanks to their supporters and the wider public.

→ **Because of you**

Charities only make the difference they do, because of you.

→ **Because of you**

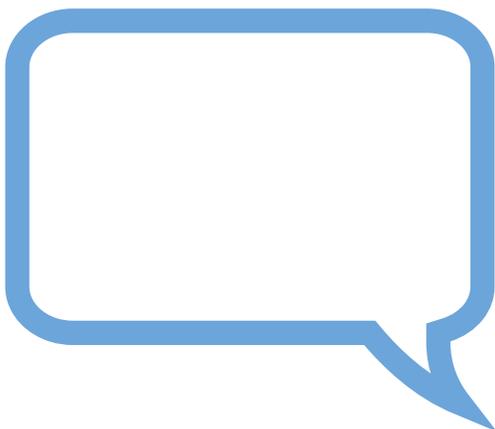
Charities want to make sure that their supporters and the wider public have complete confidence in what they do, because ultimately they exist to serve you.

→ **Confidence and reassurance**

# LANGUAGE TIPS



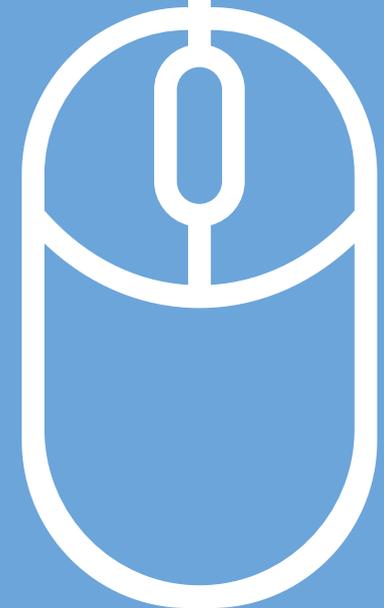
Through our focus groups, we gathered insight on words and phrases that work with public audiences, and those that don't. Using this language will help reinforce a more appealing but still accurate impression of how charities work.



Do say	Don't say
<p><b>'Professional expertise'</b> This makes the point that charities employ staff without having to mention money or salaries. It also helps to build a picture of charities as experts in what they do.</p>	<p><b>'Paid staff'</b> This makes people think about their concerns about executive pay, immediately putting them in a negative place.</p>
<p><b>'Front-line staff'</b> This speaks to the impact charities have. Giving specifics such as 'animal protection officers' or 'doctors', helps to cement this sense of impact.</p>	<p><b>'CEO'</b> This is not a familiar acronym to many people and also serves to compound the sense that charities are becoming too corporate.</p>
<p><b>'Volunteer boards', 'a board of volunteers', 'the volunteers who run the charity'</b> People are reassured that even the biggest charities are run by volunteers.</p>	<p><b>'Trustees'</b> Many people were not familiar with the term and also had an instinctively negative impression of trustees as 'rich people'.</p>
<p><b>'Effective', 'efficient', 'prudent', 'careful'</b> These are words that people want to hear about charities, and which reassure them about the way charities operate.</p> <p><b>'Transparency'</b> This is a word which is frequently used by the public in relation to how charities need to operate, and should be reflected back at them.</p>	
<p><b>'Individual goodwill'</b> This speaks to the 'because of you' theme – the difference individuals make through charity.</p> <p><b>'Together'</b> This speaks to the impact that the partnership between charities and individuals makes.</p>	<p><b>'Decency', 'moral'</b> Words like these are considered judgemental and immediately turn audiences off.</p> <p><b>'Common humanity', 'altruism'</b> These are concepts few people relate to and which are felt to be an exaggeration of human nature.</p> <p><b>'Charity is in us all'</b> Phrases like this are felt to overplay the reality, and were reacted strongly against.</p>

# HOW CHARITIES WORK

**A RESOURCE FOR YOU**



**NCVO has created a website, [howcharitieswork.com](https://www.howcharitieswork.com), to help explain some of the common questions that are asked about charities.**

We've used some of the messaging insights from our research to inform its content.

It's not intended to win over hardened cynics, but it's there to give people a place to find reliable answers to some of their questions.

We hope it will also be useful as a guide to helping you craft answers to some of these issues.

As well as general information on issues such as staff and fundraising, the site can help with explanations on knotty topics, including:

- Have charities got too big?
- Fake charities and charity fraud: what to watch out for
- How charities are addressing concerns about fundraising
- Too many charities?

**We intend that the site will evolve over time and we'd welcome your [feedback](#).**

