



REPORT

BATTLING THE BLAME GAME: EXPLORING NEW NARRATIVES ON CHILD POVERTY

March, 2022



**Save the
Children**

Photo: Young girl looks up at 'The Tightrope' sculpture, Stoke-On-Trent. Photographer: Glimpse
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CONTENTS

Summary	4
A new narrative on child poverty	4
How to use our narrative recommendations	5
Why do we need a new narrative on child poverty in the UK?	7
What is a narrative?	8
Our target audiences.....	9
Phase 1: Where are we now? Dominant narratives surrounding child poverty in the UK	10
Perceptions of poverty.....	11
How people who experience poverty are perceived.....	12
What does this mean for children?	13
What's behind these attitudes?	14
Phase 2: Finding a new narrative that works	15
Where do we need to get to?	15
Creating and testing new narratives.....	15
Phase 3: Bringing the messaging to life.....	26
Conclusions	31
A new narrative: the elements	31
Endnotes	34

Summary

A new narrative on child poverty

The pandemic has shown us that the rug can be pulled out from under anyone's life. Families who never thought they'd struggle are suffering through no fault of their own.

Rising living costs. Unstable work. Low wages. More and more families feel trapped by a lack of financial options that limit children's lives and futures.

No child deserves to struggle to concentrate at school because there wasn't enough for breakfast. Or to have clothes that don't fit because they're growing fast but the heating bills are growing faster.

All this can leave lasting scars. Children are at risk of growing up feeling anxious, isolated and lacking self-worth.

Poverty limits children's lives and futures. Let's give every child an equal chance.

When the story of child poverty is told in this way, our evidence found a broader section of the UK public are more likely to support efforts to eliminate it.

When shown to specific public audiences, beyond the liberal left, this narrative drives higher empathy for the need to address child poverty in the UK.

Our research focused on audiences with 'middling' attitudes on child poverty – neither highly engaged and sympathetic nor highly disengaged and sceptical of the need to address it. We also cross-sectioned these characteristics with those who swing in their political voting preference because these 'floating voters' will be of particular interest to current and future governments.

When exposed to these messaging elements, the audiences were more likely to:

1. see that child poverty isn't entirely the fault of parents
2. support for the idea that families living in poverty deserve more help from the state, beyond what already exists

Specifically, elements of this narrative lead to:

- a minimum 9% uplift in support for the idea that that Universal Credit should be increased for families with children. This change was highest amongst those who voted Conservative in 2019, with a 26% uplift in support.
- 69%-95% of audiences agreeing strongly with the sentiment that poverty limits children's lives.
- 63%-88% strongly agreeing with the sentiment that the pandemic has meant families who never thought they'd struggle, are suffering through no fault of their own.
- 52-84% of audiences feeling something needed to be done about the mental health impacts of poverty on children, including 57% of Conservative voters.

If we as a society want to make sure no child in the UK grows up in poverty – and that every child has the chance of a future they deserve – there must be stronger public and political will to tackle child poverty. To bring about a broad shift in attitudes – leading to greater support for the types of interventions children currently in poverty urgently need – we need a new narrative about child poverty - one that deepens understanding of children's experience of poverty, its impact on their lives, its core drivers and the solutions to poverty.

Our evidence suggests that our proposed messaging elements, frames, and stories can be used to create a unifying narrative that fosters increased public support for children and families experiencing poverty.

But this is the beginning. We will continue to research poverty narratives and collaborate with partners, so that we can build and inspire support to end child poverty in the UK – and help give every child the chance of a childhood and future they deserve.

How to use our narrative recommendations

- **Anti-poverty campaigners should root what they say in the values the British public hold** about equality: justice means that everyone has to struggle equally as hard to get what they have. Fairness means that the good things in life must be earned. Compassion is then reserved for people who work hard and get little in return.
- As a relatable entry point, they should refer to the impact of **children's unmet basic needs**. But they should also include the impact on children's mental and physical health and/or their experiences of discrimination and inequality because of poverty.

- **Highlight the impact of poverty on children's futures.** The lack of a level playing field triggers a strong emotional reaction and sense of injustice. This message encourages a focus on solutions that address the *causes* of poverty.
- Talk about poverty in the context of the **COVID-19 pandemic, since it is an easily relatable jumping-off point and it powerfully undermines** the belief that 'bad character' is the main driver of poverty by pointing to bad luck. As the pandemic relevance wanes, it will be important to talk about other issues beyond individuals' control, which force them into tough times. The cost-of-living crisis could be another relevant talking point.
- **Emphasise the role of bad luck in general.** The role of bad luck has been under-explored in traditional poverty narratives. Talking about families who never thought they'd struggle before but now are, through no fault of their own, can inspire a sense that poverty isn't something that only happens to people with 'bad character'. If bad luck strikes, almost anyone could suddenly find themselves in poverty.
- Present **poverty as escapable and solvable, to avoid triggering subconscious fear** and consequent disengagement with the topic. While metaphors of containment – 'trapped in poverty' – paint a powerful mental picture, they can suggest hopelessness and powerlessness to those affected. Fluid language that suggests poverty is not a permanent or inescapable state – people 'experiencing poverty', 'living with' poverty or 'going through' poverty - combined with solutions to it can help audiences believe that better is possible.
- Tell stories of those **working hard without reaping the rewards** – for example, families facing in-work poverty, those without support systems, families who have lost jobs or loved ones and families striving to live with dignity against the odds. Show the aspirations **parents have for their children and how parents try to alleviate the impact of poverty on their children.**
- When considering what the Government should be doing to address child poverty, there was strong support for the following policies:
 - childcare everyone can afford
 - government investment in deprived areas
 - expanding eligibility for free school meals
 - ensuring employers treat workers fairly – e.g., fair wages and fair contracts
 - improving the Universal Credit system

WHY DO WE NEED A NEW NARRATIVE ON CHILD POVERTY IN THE UK?

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, 4.3 million children in the UK were living in poverty. That means 31% of children – nine pupils in a class of 30 – were missing out on opportunities and childhood experiences others take for granted.

Now the number of children in poverty is predicted to rise by 2023/24 to 5.2 million – an additional 1.1 million children.¹

The mental toll on children of living in poverty, and the stigma that comes with it, can carry on into adulthood.²

Governments have focused on work as the main route out of poverty. While families not currently in work are more likely to fall into poverty³, being in work doesn't necessarily mean protection from it. Currently, 75% of children living in poverty are in households with at least one working adult.⁴

To improve the lives of children across the UK, action is needed to create policies that better support families experiencing poverty. Policies that give them access to the help they need, as well as providing a safety net to prevent more families from falling into poverty.

Over the last few years, we've seen the impact public attitudes can have on policies surrounding child poverty. Public outcry at children left without free school meals vouchers during the 2020 summer holidays led to the introduction of a new £120m 'covid summer food fund' for 1.3 million pupils in England.

By contrast, when the mainstream narrative makes parents' individual choices the key causes and drivers of child poverty, ignoring systemic factors, policies are more likely to be enacted that are unhelpful or even harmful to children.

For example, following the financial crash in 2008, a series of decisions were taken to cut social security. Measures such as the introduction of the two-child limit, the benefit cap, the four-year benefit freeze, and cuts to tax credits led to a significant increase in child poverty rates.

Political choices are underpinned by public narratives. The view that welfare makes families in poverty dependent on support and less likely to work has taken hold among a significant proportion of the public, paving the way for damaging political choices.

This can be seen when looking to Scotland, where narratives around poverty are less critical of people on low incomes compared to England and where the Scottish government has introduced £20 a week Scottish Child Payment for low-income families⁵. This policy has support from all major political parties in the country and is a tangible example of how more positive narratives can enable more supportive policies.

While our research focussed on views of those in England and Wales we believe a new, unifying narrative about child poverty has the potential to lead to more positive outcomes for children all over the UK.

By creating a narrative shift, we can build on the public's recent support for individual child poverty campaigns, such as Marcus Rashford's free school meals campaigning, and create support for more long-term sustainable change to eradicate child poverty.

This won't happen overnight or by one agency acting alone. It requires a multi-year, multi-actor and coordinated response.

We hope this research will be a starting point. It provides anti-poverty and child-focused organisations with tools to build new narratives about child poverty, share new stories, and help shift public opinion on child poverty.

What is a narrative?

Narratives help us make sense of the world. They describe, order, simplify and attribute meaning to the information we receive and the events we experience. A narrative could suggest people fall into poverty because they are bad at budgeting, for example.

It can be helpful to think about narratives in terms of four key features:

- **Frames:** framing helps create a picture in someone's mind. It involves selecting which aspects of an issue to focus on. It includes the use of metaphors, images, the order information is presented in, or it can appeal to particular values.
 - example: referring to 'billions spent on the benefits system', without context, can frame the costs as being too high or even unaffordable. However, if welfare spending is put in the context of other government spending or instead highlights the amount an individual receives, the audience is likely to have a different response.

- **The stories we tell and who tells them:** the stories and narrators needed to create empathy and engagement.
 - example: a mother telling her story of how she lost her business during the COVID-19 pandemic and is now making choices between food and heating is a powerful and easily imagined story due to the well-known and widescale impact of the pandemic on people's finances.
- **Language:** being sensitive to implicit meanings and associations of words and choose metaphors that convey the right message.
 - example: avoiding using the word 'benefits' as it has historically been associated with stories of perceived 'benefit cheats' or 'benefit fraud'.
- **Messaging:** the key ideas we want to get across through the narrative.
 - example: a narrative that conveys an overarching message that poverty isn't something that can be solved through personal budgeting, or that children don't deserve to be hindered by poverty.

Narratives are powerful. They help us understand the world. They underlie our beliefs and behaviour. They help shape our institutions and society.

Our cultural, social, and political spheres are permeated by narratives – sometimes with damaging effect if they entrench inequities. For instance, they can perpetuate incorrect and harmful beliefs about groups of people. Or they may inaccurately attribute the root causes of social issues and, consequently, what should or can be done about them.⁶

OUR TARGET AUDIENCES

The key to growing a broader coalition of public support for ending child poverty is to persuade sections of the public who don't already agree with us.

In their research into how both experts and the public understand UK poverty, Britain Thinks, in partnership with the Joseph Roundtree Foundation⁷, outlined six different audiences within the British public according to their views on poverty. Of these six groups, we pinpointed two – the 'Precarious Pessimists' and 'Undecided Moderates' – as being potentially more susceptible to changing their attitude towards government intervention on poverty. We decided to focus primarily on these two groups in our research.

These two groups do not sit at either end of the left–right political spectrum. They are neither from the segment of the public that has the strongest sympathy for people experiencing poverty, nor from one that is most sceptical about state intervention for families in poverty.

- **Precarious Pessimists** take poverty seriously and are likely to believe they are living in it. They believe poverty is a problem but also that the ‘system is rigged’ and that elites have the most influence over government policies and use this influence to benefit themselves and keep others down. They also often believe in the ‘culture of poverty’ model, identified by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. This is a belief that certain communities have a culture of worklessness, which leads to an unbreakable intergenerational cycle of poverty.⁸
- **Undecided Moderates** view poverty in the UK as a serious issue but have conflicting views about it. They are less likely to have strong views on it, compared with other audiences, as they tend to have no direct experience of it. They also strongly agree with the ‘culture of poverty’ model.

While our primary focus was on these two segments, our assumption was that even those who strongly support charities such as Save the Children, can hold complex and even conflicting views about UK poverty. To provide a comparison with the less engaged audiences we targeted, and to avoid alienating our supporter base with a new narrative, in the first stage of the research, we included some participants who match the profile of our most engaged supporters. These participants cross-over significantly with the ‘Passionate Idealist’ and ‘Empathetic Liberal’ segments identified by Britain Thinks and Joseph Rowntree Foundation. They typically hold strong views about poverty and feel passionately it should be addressed. However, they can be distant from the experience of poverty and susceptible to believing the system will always be rigged.

PHASE 1: WHERE ARE WE NOW?

DOMINANT NARRATIVES SURROUNDING CHILD POVERTY IN THE UK

Pre- research, our assumption about the dominant UK poverty narrative could be best summarised by Mary O’Hara in her book, *The Shame Game*:

*"The poor are to blame for their own predicament because of bad life choices and if only they would stop expecting government to support them and work hard like everyone else they would be ‘productive members of society who have contributed their fair share.’"*⁹

In this narrative poverty is viewed as the result of an individual's moral failing rather than a systematic problem. This view has been prolific in political and public debate.

To gain a better understanding of the cultural landscape of poverty and child poverty we undertook a semiotic review of media and cultural influences around poverty, which we cover later in this report.

What do our target audiences – the Precarious Pessimists and Undecided Moderates – think about child poverty in the UK? To examine the personal and emotional points of connection with poverty among these audiences, we undertook 20 one-to-one conversations with people from rural, town and city settings. This was followed by six deliberative group discussions to explore possible barriers to new narratives and how to overcome them.

A language analysis of focus group discussions was also carried out so we could better understand our target audiences' values, as well as the words, ideas and metaphors they are already using.

Perceptions of poverty

While the concept of poverty in the UK is broadly accepted, it is often thought about in terms of basic needs. In other words, poverty is seen as a lack of essential items, such as food, shoes, school uniforms, books, bedding, or housing, rather than an ongoing experience that can affect people not just materially, but physically and psychologically.

From this limited view of what poverty is, it is difficult to see poverty as a symptom of systemic issues. The welfare state is perceived – even by some of our more engaged audiences – as providing enough support to stop struggling families falling into poverty:

*"I do honestly feel inside that if a parent is on benefits they might not have loads and loads of money to spare, but they will have enough to feed their children."
Save the Children supporter profile*

The recent British Social Attitudes Survey¹⁰ supports this finding, and its trends suggest that whilst attitudes towards the welfare state have been slowly moving in a more positive direction over the last 10 years, the pandemic did not dramatically change the course of attitudes.

Awareness of some issues has shifted – financial precarity was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, while Marcus Rashford also raised awareness of child food poverty. However, these issues tend to be viewed by audiences independently, rather than as a symptom of a larger problem, and there is very little understanding of the causes of poverty. Few people in our research were able to imagine the experience of living in a poverty that is not, to some extent, self-propagated and permanent.

Audiences do appear to recognise that Britain has its own version of poverty, but 'real poverty' is still seen by many as something that happens in poorer countries.

We see this in people within our target audiences who grew up in a lower-income family and describe their experience as either harmless – or even character-forming.

How people who experience poverty are perceived

The dominant narrative about people in poverty is that parents are the cause of their own poverty because they lack 'good character'. This is seen either because they 'chose' to live the way they do or were not 'strong enough' to overcome adversity.

They are seen as:

- stationary with no ambition, or lacking aspiration
- irresponsible spenders who can't manage their money
- people who don't make the most of their education
- people who prefer not to work
- lacking family values or having poor parenting skills

"Kids shouldn't be hungry any more, food's that cheap, how can you be hungry? Go to Asda and get a loaf of bread for 20p."
Precarious Pessimist

The logic is, if you are that short of money, it's probably because you're not working hard enough to generate more or to live within your means. The greatest sin is spending un-earned money on what are framed as luxuries (e.g., iPhones, takeaways, trainers, gaming consoles).

"It's like someone put on social media – yeah, the kids might be starving but they'll have a brand-new phone and a brand-new pair of trainers."
Precarious Pessimist

This narrative is so embedded that audiences struggled to consider the role of other causes of poverty and in fact often actively resist them.

However, some ideas of 'struggling but silent families' emerged. These were often people or families that audience members knew in their lives whose character had therefore been validated. With these families, the impact on children of not having enough money was easier to identify and engage with, and the audiences were free to think about the role of money.

"There is a family near us, she works in a supermarket, he is a lorry driver. They work all hours and I know they are struggling even though they have a mortgage."
Undecided Moderate

"At the end of the day you did think a certain type of person went to a food bank – like they were on benefits or using their money for drugs or something. But now when you see people looking like they're normal, and they can't even afford it. It just shows that things have got that bad."
Precarious Pessimist

What does this mean for children?

Although audiences feel for children living in poverty, some people may see them as not entirely innocent. Among our target audiences, while there was a lot of sympathy overall for children in poverty, there were two key barriers to acknowledging they might need greater support.

First, free education was seen as the ultimate leveller. It was strongly felt that every child has the same opportunities at school and therefore could all succeed if they worked hard enough.

Second, the character of children themselves, shaped by the parents, had an impact on their future. The cycle of poverty was seen as being not down to money, but to attitude and character.

"My daughter will have the drive to succeed. She will have opportunities on a level playing field, but that's because of our work ethic."
Save the Children supporter profile

However, there was sympathy for how poverty can deprive children of opportunities to connect, experience and learn. Not only were the practical implications on children's lives seen, but audience members connected emotionally with those experiences, sympathising with what it feels like to be stigmatised, excluded, isolated, or shamed.

"There are children on free school meals, they can't afford school uniforms and things like that. Straight away that causes problems and gives a sort of message – they are labelled with low self-esteem and then it is almost like a snowball effect."
Undecided Moderate

"It is the long-term effects that jumped out at me. That sense of low self-worth stayed with her even into adulthood."
Undecided Moderate

"My mate wanted to be a games designer, but his parents couldn't afford a computer. He offered to work Saturdays at the shop until he could pay for it. It took him years. He got it in the end, and he is a designer – but imagine what he could have done if he'd had that same start two years earlier."
Save the Children supporter profile

The long-term impacts of these missed opportunities, however, can be hard for audiences to see. Without a clear sense of the future impact on children, it is hard for audiences to see these issues as political rather than charitable.

What's behind these attitudes?

To understand what's driving some of these attitudes we must look to cultural influences. Compared with personal experience, cultural influences have a disproportionate effect on attitudes, particularly when those cultural stories are shared again and again.

Even the Precarious Pessimists, who are more likely to have experienced poverty in their lives, were quick to distance themselves from families in poverty and to refer to familiar cultural tropes about the characters of these families. Our semiotics analysis found several cultural drivers underpinning this tendency with the most prominent being:

- **The longstanding history of the 'deserving vs undeserving poor' narrative.** This moralistic tone is present in attitudinal survey results from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s but even post-war support for the welfare state was not unconditional.¹¹ Health reforms in the post-war period had the clearest approval, with 88% in favour and 'better pensions' were the most commonly cited by respondents, but 68% agreed that 'there is no reason why a childless widow should get a pension for life: if she is able to work, she should work'. The narrative of personal responsibility and a small state was popularised by Thatcher's Government in the 70s and 80s, and the rhetoric of aspiration continued under New Labour. More recently, the narrative was used by Chancellor George Osborne, to support austerity policies in the wake of the 2008 economic crash.
- **The portrayal and imagery used to signify poverty in the media.** Across much of the media – in newspapers, documentaries, movies, TV programmes and even, at times, by charities – people in poverty are rarely represented with much dignity (see Channel 4's *Shameless*), work of any kind is seldom featured in their experience (see documentaries, *Benefits Street* or *Benefits Britain*), there's a strong fixation on squalor ('Mum says she sees rats scuttling past as she bathes her five young children in infested home', *The Sun*, October 2020), and there's a focus on feckless, immoral or moderately criminal behaviour (See Danny Boyle's film, *Trainspotting*). When representation is more favourable, the focus tends to be on traditional working-class life, rather than the reality of poverty.
- **The media portrayal of children in poverty as lacking agency.** Children tend to be presented in the media as at the mercy of their parents or the state, which makes it difficult to argue for the role of money in their lives and make a clear link between increasing benefits and better outcomes for children. At the other extreme, children from poor backgrounds are celebrated in the media when they achieve exceptional things 'in spite of the restrictions of poverty' – e.g., "Teen who grew up in poverty and had no place to do homework offered place at Oxford". This plays into the idea that any person, even a child, can overcome poverty if they have the right attitude and work ethic.

- **The subconscious fear of poverty which drives people to put distance between themselves and those who are in poverty.** If poverty is about systemic failings and bad luck then, in the public's mind, there's little protection from it. It's far less threatening to assume that those in poverty don't have the necessary character or work ethic required to pull themselves out. Our target audiences want to believe they have these attributes to draw on should they find themselves down on their luck.

PHASE 2: FINDING A NEW NARRATIVE THAT WORKS

Where do we need to get to?

To create a coalition of 'middle Britain' that will demand action for children to have childhoods free from poverty, by providing families with the support they need, we need a narrative that shows that poverty:

- isn't just about destitution but also about a lack of opportunities, stigma, and longer-term impacts
- is not permanent: children can escape it if their families are given the right support
- doesn't happen simply because of individuals' poor choices, motivation, or morality

The aim of this phase of research was to therefore create new narratives – translating concepts and values into words and messages – and then testing them.

Creating and testing new narratives

We chose which narrative themes to test based on:

- the opportunity areas and core values revealed by audiences in Phase 1
- input from our partners, including the Child Poverty Action Group, End Child Poverty coalition and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- input from Save the Children's parent campaigner network, who have experience of poverty

Without insights from the parent network we risked ending up with messaging and language that, while appealing to sceptical audiences, did not reflect the complex experience of modern poverty.

We created three narrative propositions – short pieces of text describing different outcomes and characteristics of modern poverty – then tested through qualitative methods (focus groups) and quantitative methods (a mass survey).

A quantitative survey helped indicate the extent to which the narrative propositions had the ability to shift attitudes. This survey was taken by 1,350 people – 629 Undecided Moderates and 721 Precarious Pessimists.

Individual components of each narrative, as well as its overall impact, were assessed in terms of audiences' agreement with statements about poverty and whether they felt more strongly that 'something needs to be done about it' after reading the narrative components. Audiences were also asked before and after hearing the narratives whether they believed Universal Credit for families experiencing poverty should be increased, decreased, or kept the same.

Additional questions were asked about preferred policies to address child poverty, and what the audience felt about Save the Children talking about the issue, to assess whether they felt a large international charity was the right messenger for UK child poverty.

While this phase of our research involved both Precarious Pessimists and Undecided Moderates, our analysis focuses more on the opinions of Undecided Moderates. This is because Precarious Pessimists responded positively to almost all of the narratives proposals presented to them, likely because they are closer to the experience of poverty.

Our three narrative propositions

The three narratives were around 500 words each. For each of them, we also developed a headline message – a summary statement and call to action:

- 1. Poverty limits children's lives and futures.** Let's give every child an equal chance.

Phase 1 of the research revealed a clear sense of empathy towards children who are discriminated against or excluded as a result of poverty, and a strong feeling of injustice at the idea children's futures might be impacted. The audiences didn't always naturally consider children's futures without some prompting, however, so with this theme we wanted to test a story about children's childhoods and futures being impacted by a lack of money.

- 2. Universal Credit is failing** parents and children instead of pulling them out of poverty. Let's create a fit-for-purpose system we can all be proud of.

This theme aimed to pivot away from individual experience and look to systemic failures against children that could either push people into poverty or hinder them from being able to pull themselves out. The negative connotations with Universal Credit were notable in phase 1, and we wanted to pursue this sentiment further to see if we could engage the audience to imagine a system that would better serve children and protect people against circumstantial reasons for poverty.

In this narrative we also talked about how the pandemic showed that the rug can be pulled from anyone's feet, again tapping into the sentiment that people could face poverty because of external circumstances and bad luck, not because of their character.

3. **Hard work isn't paying off** for parents and children. Let's release the pressure.

This theme aimed to tap into the audience's strong favouring of the value of hard work, but also the compassion they displayed for hardworking families who aren't getting their just desserts: for example, single parents who might juggle multiple jobs, spend money wisely, make every penny count, but are still unable to reap the rewards. We also wanted to emphasize the hard work of poverty itself, outside of work. The relentless budgeting, planning, and strategizing to provide for children when faced with poverty.

Elements of each of the propositions, in their long form, resonated with or triggered different members of the focus groups. To boil down what was and was not working, we broke down the narratives into their component parts for the quantitative test:

- headline message and call to action
- systemic reasons for poverty
- impacts of poverty on children
- mental health impact of poverty

We then tested these components with respondents.

Headline messages

1. **Poverty limits children's lives** and futures. Let's give every child an equal chance.
2. **Universal Credit is failing** parents and children instead of pulling them out of poverty. Let's create a fit-for-purpose system we can all be proud of.
3. **Hard work isn't paying off** for parents and children. Let's release the pressure.

Of the three narrative messages summarised above, 'poverty limits children's lives' received the strongest agreement with 69% of Undecided Moderates and 95% of Precarious Pessimists stating they 'strongly agreed' with the statement. By comparison, 40% of Undecided Moderates and 75% of Precarious Pessimists showed agreement with 'Universal Credit is failing', and 47% and 89% with 'hard work isn't paying off'.

'Poverty limits children's lives' was also the most popular when it came to taking action: 58% of Undecided Moderates and 83% of Precarious Pessimists stated that it made them feel that something

needs to be done. For 'Universal Credit is failing', the response was 41% and 76% respectively and for 'hard work isn't paying off' it was 41% and 79% respectively.

"It shows a cause-and-effect relationship between poverty and the impact on children's lives. It is obvious something needs to be done about it "
Undecided Moderate's reaction to 'Poverty limits children's lives'

Systemic reasons for poverty

Our three narratives each described different systemic reasons why poverty exists or continues to exist:

1. **The UK economy isn't working for everyone.** Rising living costs. Unstable work. Low wages. More and more families feel trapped by a lack of financial options.
2. **The pandemic has shown us that the rug can be pulled out from under anyone's life.** Families who never thought they'd struggle are suffering through no fault of their own.
3. **Universal Credit is not enough to keep families from falling into poverty.** Parents work hard to do right by their children, but for those without the income they need in the first place, it's never enough.

All three narrative propositions resonated but Undecided Moderates agreed most strongly with option 2, which gives the context of the pandemic – with 63% agreeing strongly with the statement.

"It's a really sad and emotional topic. These little people have nothing to do with the situation they find themselves in and as the pandemic has shown us, anything can happen to anyone at any time. Everyone needs to come together to help this nation be better at dealing with its most vulnerable."
Precarious Pessimist's reaction to narrative proposition giving the pandemic context

Focusing on Universal Credit failings as a reason poverty isn't being solved (option 3) doesn't resonate as much as the other two options with 21% of Undecided Moderates and 76% of Precarious Pessimists strongly agreeing with it. While 46% and 93% respectively agreed with the statement on how the economy doesn't work for everyone (option 1).

Amongst our audiences, Conservative voters *were closely aligned with Undecided Moderates on the messages that work but were even more resistant to blaming Universal Credit for child poverty's persistence.

* Defined as those who stated they voted Conservative in the last general election. This accounts for 25% of surveyed Undecided Moderates and 10% of Precarious Pessimists.

Impact of poverty on children

Our three narratives each described, in different ways, the impact of poverty on children. In brackets is our internal descriptor.

1. **(Missed opportunities)** Children from families impacted by poverty are missing out on things most children take for granted. Parents can't afford nurseries, so at a young age, children might not have the same opportunities to learn and play. As they grow older, there's no money for school trips or after-school clubs, so children don't get to discover and develop talents.
2. **(Basic needs unmet)** No child deserves to go hungry because the pandemic took their parent's job away. To struggle to concentrate at school because there wasn't enough for breakfast. Or to have clothes that don't fit because they're growing fast but the heating bills are growing faster.
3. **(Absorbing parents' stress)** Parents are doing their best to hide the stress of struggling with multiple jobs and chores - but they still worry that children are affected. And because they don't have any headspace left at the end of the day, children are missing out on quality family time.

The more immediate impact on the basic needs of childhood (option 2) rung most true for both audience segments, with 81% of Undecided Moderates and 95% of Precarious Pessimists stating they 'strongly agreed' with the statement. This is compared to 51% and 86% respectively for option 1, and 41% and 75% for option 3.

Mental health impact

In initial focus groups, mental health impacts emerged quite strongly as an emotionally engaging way for our audience to think about the outcomes of poverty. Audiences spontaneously talked about the impact on children's confidence as well as subjects like bullying and being excluded or isolated. Looking at mental health also helped create sympathy for children among those who felt frustrated with and placed blame on parents. We therefore decided to test the following statement:

- All this can leave lasting scars. Children are at risk of growing up feeling anxious, isolated, and lacking self-worth.

Overall, this mental health statement received strong agreement, including 59% of Conservative voter respondents agreeing with the statement and 57% of the same group also felt strongly that something needs to be done after seeing the statement.

However, there was a little more scepticism among Undecided Moderates, with only 51% saying they strongly agreed with the statement.

Testing narrative propositions – full narratives

The full narratives were then shown to respondents. In brackets is our internal descriptor:

(Poverty limits children's lives)

Poverty limits children's lives and futures.

The UK economy isn't working for everyone. Rising living costs. Unstable work. Low wages. More and more families feel trapped by a lack of financial options.

Children from families impacted by poverty are missing out on things most children take for granted. Parents can't afford nurseries, so at a young age, children might not have the same opportunities to learn and play. As they grow older, there's no money for school trips or after-school clubs, so children don't get to discover and develop talents.

All this can leave lasting scars. Children are at risk of growing up feeling anxious, isolated and lacking self-worth.

Let's give every child an equal chance.

(Bad luck (pandemic context))

Universal Credit is failing parents and children instead of pulling them out of poverty.

The pandemic has shown us that the rug can be pulled out from under anyone's life. Families who never thought they'd struggle are suffering through no fault of their own.

No child deserves to go hungry because the pandemic took their parent's job away. To struggle to concentrate at school because there wasn't enough for breakfast. Or to have clothes that don't fit because they're growing fast but the heating bills are growing faster.

All this can leave lasting scars. Children are at risk of growing up feeling anxious, isolated and lacking self-worth.

Let's create a fit-for-purpose system we can all be proud of.

(Hard work isn't always enough)

Struggling with poverty is hard work for parents and children.

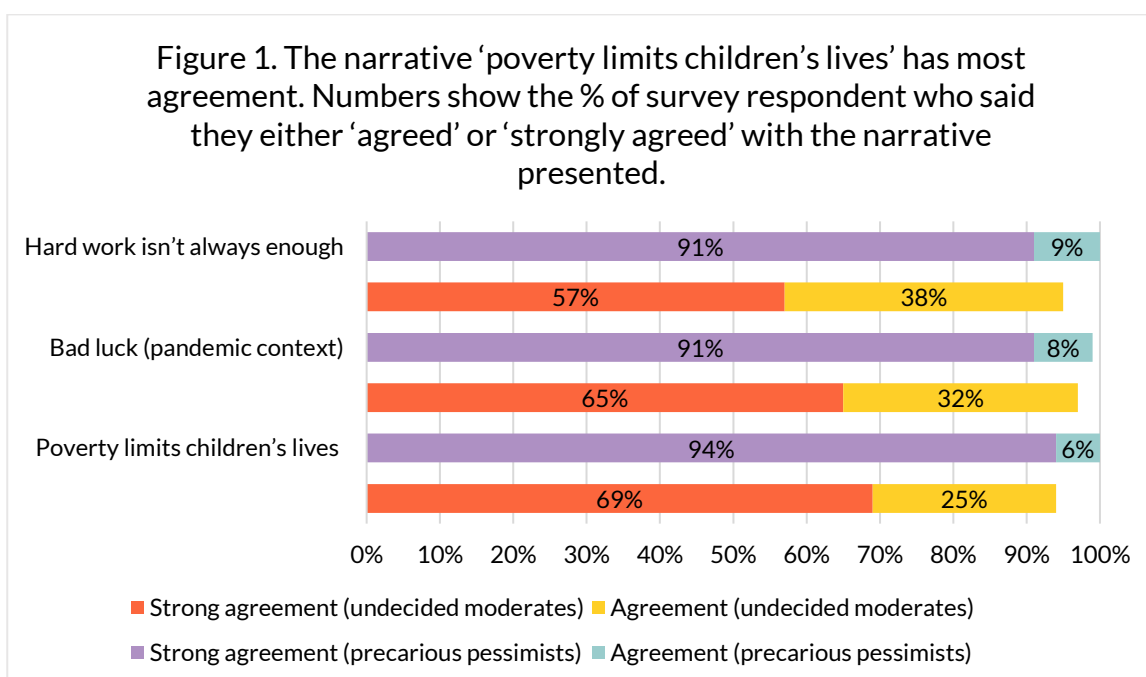
Universal Credit is not enough to keep families from falling into poverty - parents work hard to do right by their children, but for those without the income they need in the first place, it's never enough.

Parents are doing their best to hide the stress of struggling with multiple jobs and chores, but they still worry that children are affected. And because they don't have any headspace left at the end of the day, children are missing out on quality family time.

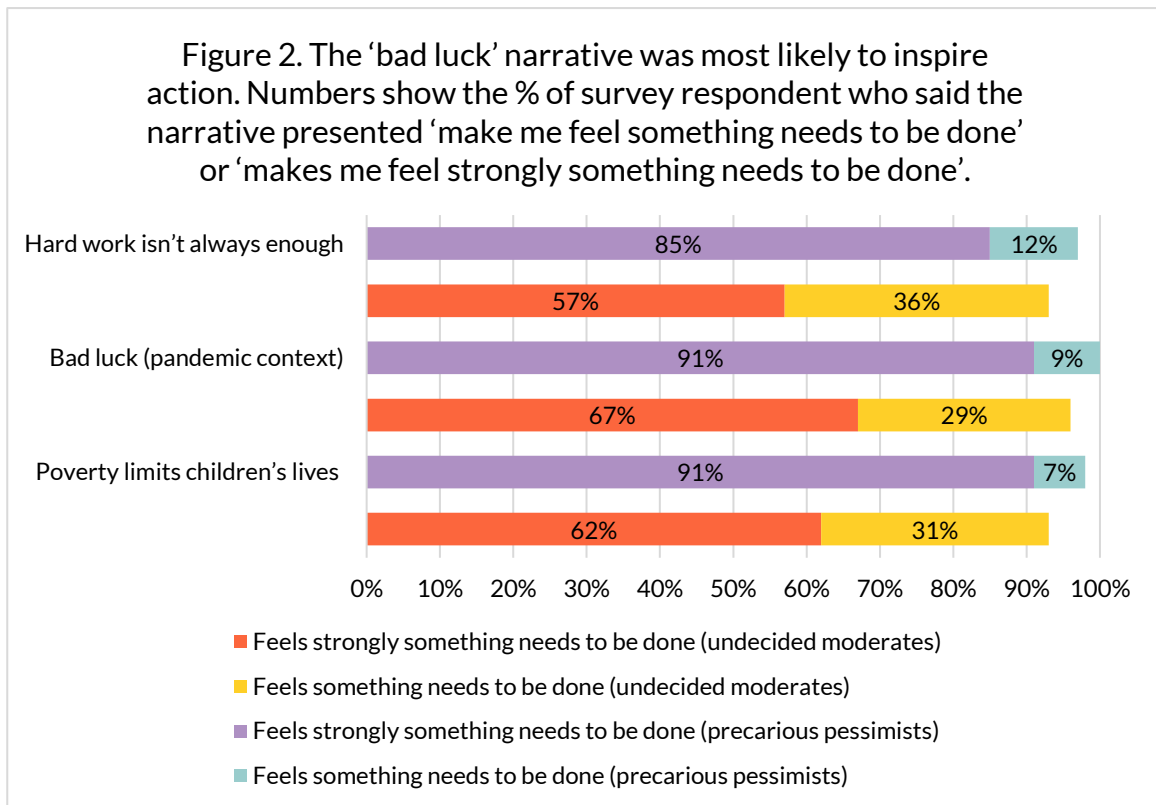
All this can leave lasting scars. Children are at risk of growing up feeling anxious, isolated and lacking self-worth.

Let's release the pressure

Of these narratives the 'poverty limits children's lives' had strongest agreement (Figure 1).



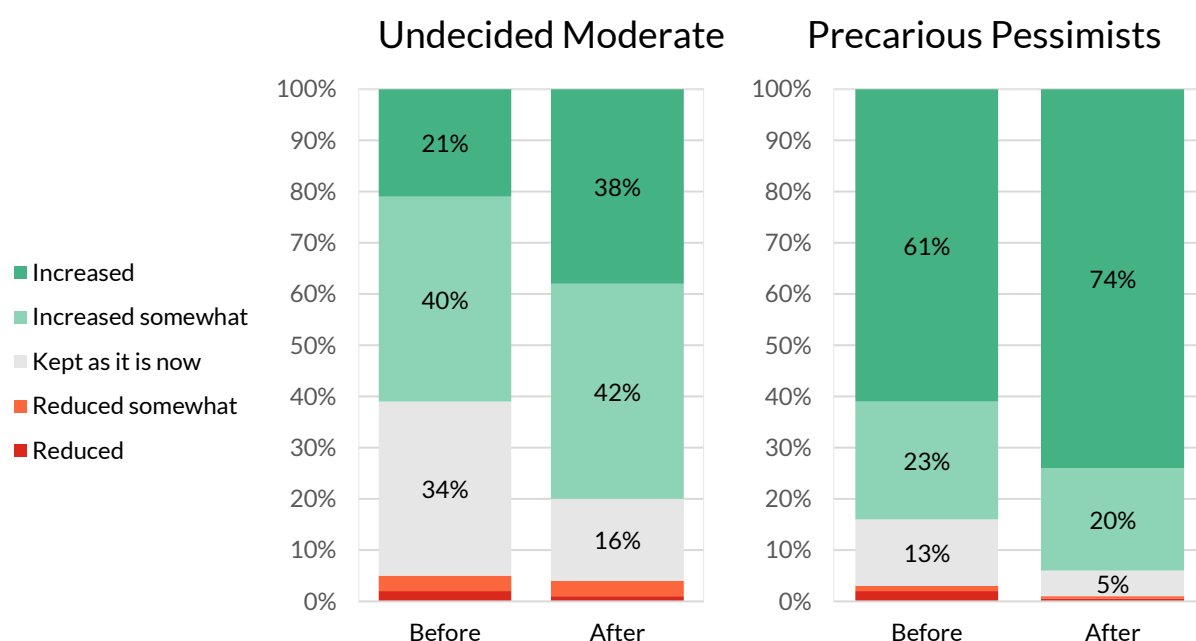
However, when exploring which narrative created the strongest feelings around taking action, the 'bad luck' narrative came out on top (Figure 2).



Precarious Pessimists are already sold on the issue of poverty. Their strong agreement never drops below 85% for any of the messages tested.

Undecided Moderates are more reserved. Although they still showed high levels of agreement with most messages - with children's unmet basic needs being particularly powerful - they were less supportive of the narrative of Universal Credit failings as a cause of poverty or hinder to solving it.

Figure 3. All three narrative propositions created a rise in support for increasing Universal Credit for families with children. Numbers show the % of the tested audience that said they thought Universal Credit should be increased or decreased for families with children, before and after exposure to narrative propositions.



After seeing the narrative propositions, all audience segments showed an uplift in the belief that Universal Credit needs to be increased for families with children. This was biggest amongst Undecided Moderates and Conservative voters when they were exposed to messages about the impact of the pandemic on children's basic needs being met, with an uplift of 21% and 26% respectively.

Our audiences' preferred action on child poverty and their role within it

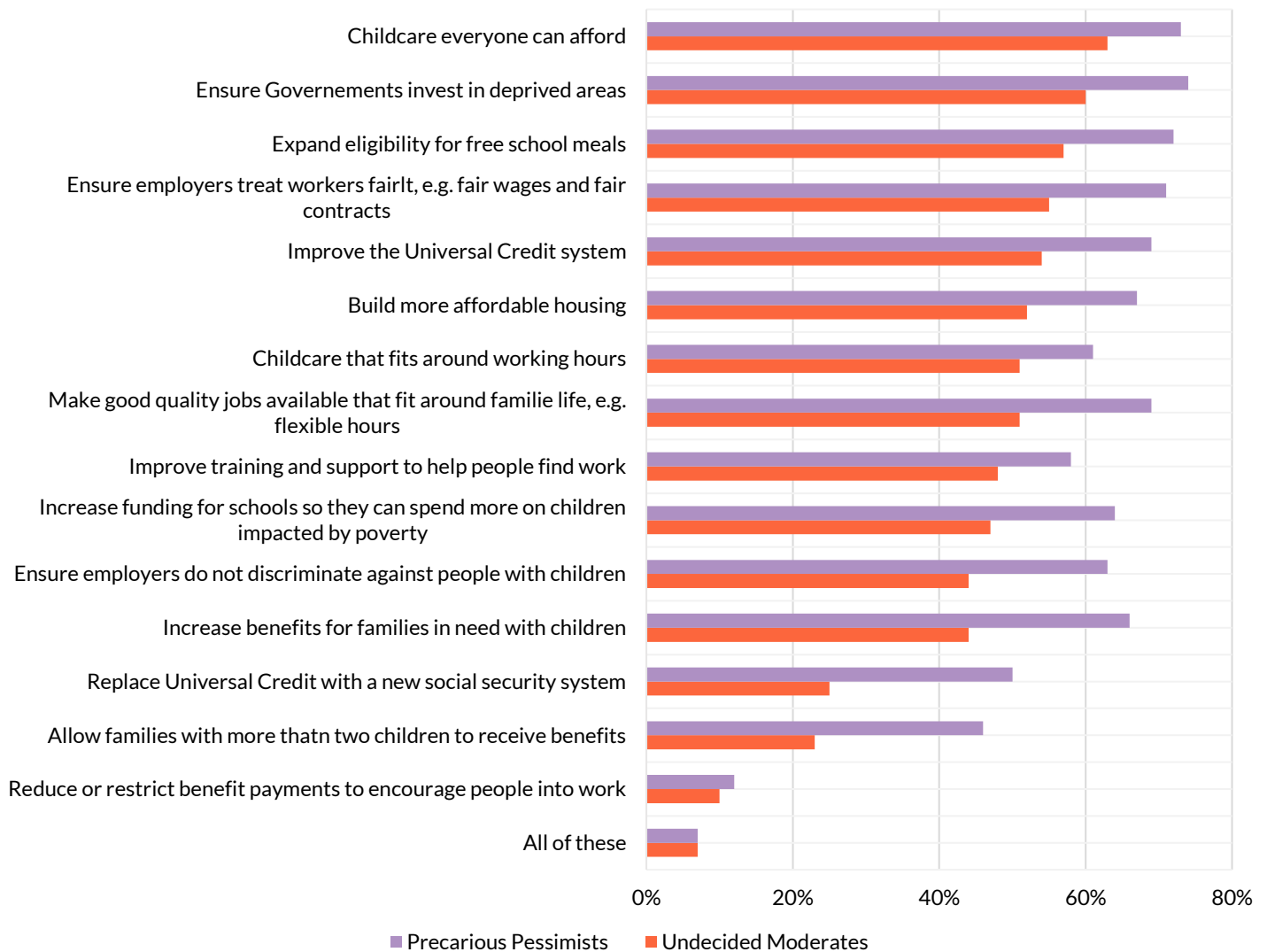
Following exposure to the narratives we asked respondents which policy solutions governments should prioritise out of a list of 15. We included the options from NatCen's British Social Attitudes Survey as well as some common campaign calls from anti-poverty advocates.

The responses reveal a clear hierarchy and consistency between Undecided Moderates and Precarious Pessimists, particularly on the top five actions. Their priority solutions are:

1. childcare everyone can afford
2. ensure governments invest in deprived areas
3. expand eligibility for free school meals

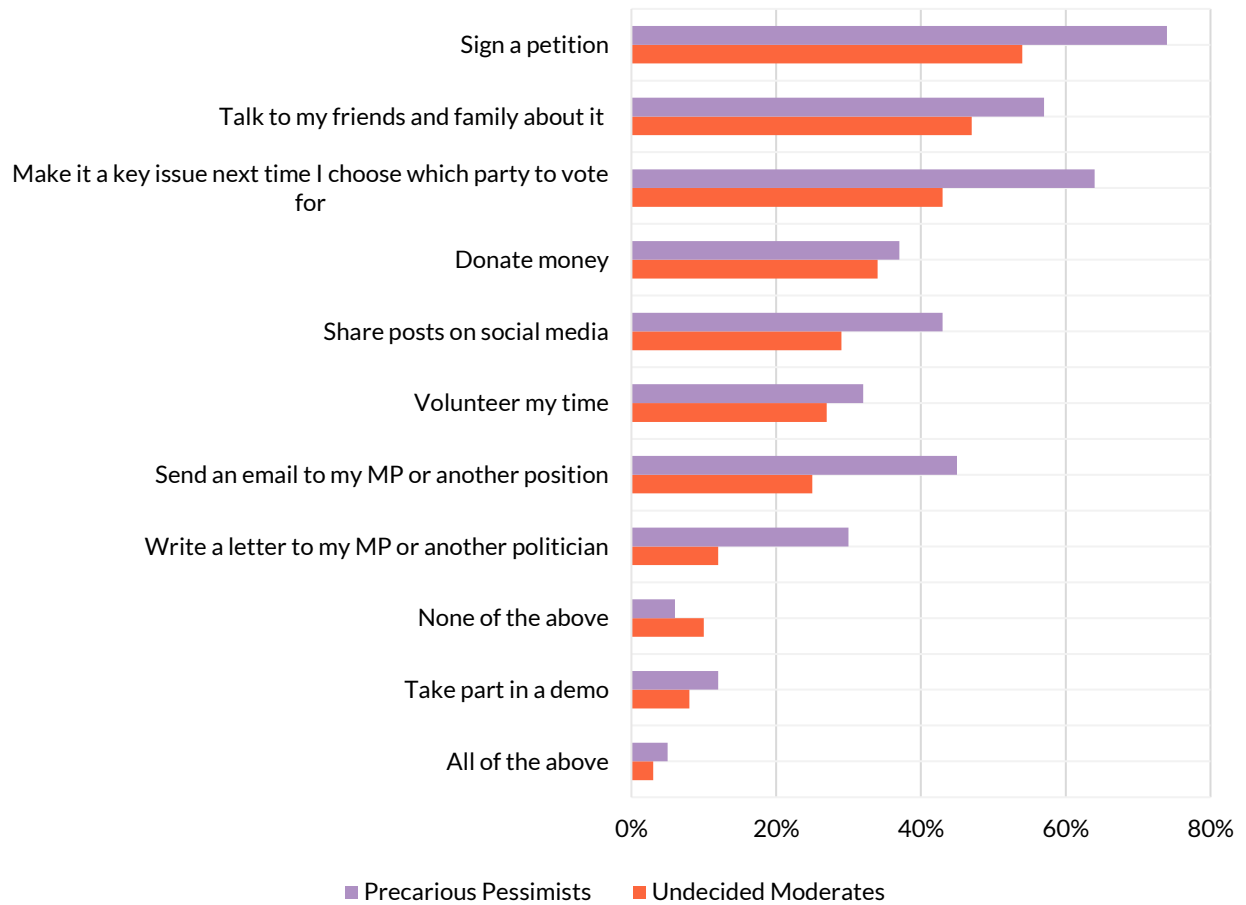
4. ensure employers treat workers fairly – e.g., fair wages and fair contracts
5. improve the Universal Credit system

Figure 4. Undecided Moderates and Precarious Pessimists agree on the top 5 priorities for government to tackle child poverty. Policies selected when asked the question ‘What should the government prioritise?’



Since Undecided Moderates and Precarious Pessimists were unfamiliar audience segments to Save the Children, we were unsure going into the research as to what type of action, if any, they might take to address child poverty at an individual level. Following exposure to the narratives, we saw a particularly strong willingness from Precarious Pessimists to act. There was a similar pattern of preferred individual action between the two segments, with petition-signing the most popular action. Interestingly, both segments prioritised the option to make it a key issue when considering who to vote for in an election.

Figure 5. Top individual actions to take are petition signing, prioritising the issue in voting, and talking to friends and family. Actions selected when asked 'What would you consider doing about child poverty in the UK?'



PHASE 3: BRINGING THE MESSAGING TO LIFE

A key part of shifting a dominant narrative is to promote new narratives in strategic public places to see how well they are adopted. Following our qualitative and quantitative testing of messaging with target audiences, we commissioned a creative activation of the narrative, to see how the messaging landed when it was brought to life in a public space. Partnering with a creative agency, we commissioned an art piece in Stoke-on-Trent in Staffordshire, an area which covers three red wall constituency seats from the 2019 general election.

A case study in a target constituency

Title: The Tightrope

Narrative activation route: An outdoor art piece depicting the experience of poverty by showing a parent walking on a tightrope with an insecure safety net underneath her. Members of the public were attracted to visit the statue via the offer of a family-friendly experience, with free food and circus workshops, staying within the tightrope theme. They were encouraged to engage with the art piece whilst they were there.

How the new narrative components were tested within the activation:

- **Sculpture:** The image of a mother balancing on a precarious tightrope, while weighed down by the pressures of poverty, aimed to bring to life the type of story that resonates with target audiences: a family that lacks a proper support system.
- **Information board:** This explained what the sculpture represented and gave examples of the drivers that push families into poverty (e.g., rising living costs, low wages, and cuts to social security). They also shared the stories of local families, including how their basic needs were unmet and the impact of the experience of poverty on their mental health.
- **Repairing the net:** To leave with a feeling that something can and should be done, attendees helped to repair the safety net together. They did this by tying on notes on which they had written their own suggestions regarding what should be done by communities and the Government.

Audience evaluation:

To assess if and how the art piece shifted opinions within our target audiences, in-depth interviews were run with a number of people who attended the event.

Most of the interviewees were selected ahead of the event and were asked to attend as part of their participation. A small number of other participants were invited to join after being approached while at the event, but all of the research participants fitted the Undecided Moderate profile.



The sculpture was supported by an information board that shared stories of local families who had experienced poverty and it used messaging excerpts from the narrative propositions that had worked best in Phase 1 and 2 of the research.



Attendees to the sculpture were also invited to interact with it by repairing the safety net underneath the tightrope with a ribbon that had a message from them attached to it. The message contained their thoughts about what should be done to support families experiencing poverty.



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Results:

- While the sculpture on its own didn't manage to convey the complex experience of poverty for our target audiences, it enabled parents to see themselves reflected in it and created an access point.
- The supporting stories on the information board highlighted how much worse life is for those without enough money.

"It certainly made me feel empathetic towards this mum, who I'd sort of already put myself in her shoes when I first arrived [and saw the sculpture]."
Undecided Moderate

- People recognised that child poverty exists but felt that the stories brought to life what it means for families.

"I remember reading that people can't afford to work. That really shocked me. I was like, surely people earning minimum wage should be able to afford childcare?"
Undecided Moderate

- Repairing the safety net also stimulates debate and problem-solving, shifting engagement from passive to more active.

"I liked it that it wasn't so in your face, and it wasn't all just about information, information, information... I really liked the little tags that you could write on. You feel like you've done something proactive and it's not in your face it was very sort of gentle."
Undecided Moderate

- Parents' stories deliver increased recognition, understanding and empathy.

"I thought, oh my God, it's even harder than I first thought for this lady isn't it? Not only is she having to do all that, what's she doing it on? Probably, you know, a very tight budget or a shoestring budget."
Undecided Moderate

"I've never heard my parents say, we can't put the heating on because we've got to feed the kids, or I can't clothe you so you're going to have to wear clothes that are too small or trainers that don't fit. I've never had that personally, so I think it was a bit of 'God, people have to have that conversation with each other.'"

Undecided Moderate

- The stories also made some people reflect on their previous ideas about personal responsibility as the main cause of poverty.

"Everybody should have the same opportunities to thrive and flourish and do what they want to do with their lives. I didn't really think of that before. I just thought that people who chose to not work chose to not work."

Undecided Moderate

- The safety net got audiences thinking about what causes these situations, what can be done about it and whose responsibility it is. Suggestions tied to the sculpture's safety net included:
 - more conversations with local MPs and local community
 - more support from government
 - assistance with childcare costs

CONCLUSIONS

A new narrative: the elements

At the start of this report, we outlined the four key elements of a narrative: frames, messaging, stories and who tells them, and language. But what do these elements look like in our final narrative?

Values

Our audiences believe that life is a struggle, nothing is given, and nobody should receive special treatment. There are forces that push or pull people back and hinder them moving forwards. People with 'good character' struggle against these forces and should be rewarded for their efforts.

Compassion is therefore reserved for people who struggle but don't get what they deserve, and children who don't get equal chances despite the efforts of their families.

Frames

1. Poverty as bad luck is under-explored in traditional poverty narratives. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in exacerbating inequality delivers a powerful rationale for talking about this issue now – and shifting attitudes away from seeing 'bad character' as the driver of poverty. The cost-of-living increases in 2022 is another relevant example.
2. Basic needs (food, clothes, etc) being unmet remains the most powerful concept for engaging people with the impact of poverty. However, it is worth noting the risks and limitations of using this in a narrative. Though it does evoke a lot of sympathy for children, this concept can easily slip into judgement and blame of parents, which can be detrimental to the argument for solutions. This approach also grounds poverty as just destitution, rather than allowing for the broader experience of poverty to be told, which includes children's social exclusion, isolation and restricted opportunities throughout life. It may also undermine support for more robust welfare policies which could address the causes of poverty¹² and instead point towards poverty alleviation policies, such as free school meals.
3. Bringing in the impact of poverty on children's mental health, as well as on basic needs, will increase empathy and allow us to reference the impact on both children's childhoods, and their futures.
4. Poverty messaging that triggers fear without solution or agency is unlikely to lead to a belief that change can happen. It's critical that audiences feel empowered and hopeful in some way.

Messaging

There are many ways of structuring the poverty story, and the below are not perfectly - worded messages. However, the sentiments in these statements resonated most powerfully with audiences in our research:

Context: *The pandemic has shown us that the rug can be pulled out from under anyone's life. Families who never thought they'd struggle are suffering through no fault of their own.*

Driver: *Rising living costs. Unstable work. Low wages. More and more families feel trapped by a lack of financial options that limits children's lives and futures.*

Impact: *No child deserves to struggle to concentrate at school because there wasn't enough for breakfast. Or to have clothes that don't fit because they're growing fast but the heating bills are growing faster. All this can leave lasting scars. Children are at risk of growing up feeling anxious, isolated and lacking self-worth.*

Solution: *Poverty limits children's lives and futures. Let's give every child an equal chance (via affordable childcare, more free school meals, and improved Universal Credit).*

Stories and who tells them

Stories should ideally include:

- unmet basic needs and the impact this has on children's mental health and wellbeing
- children who don't have the key essentials for life and learning
- the experiences of children more than parents, to avoid judgment and blame of the parents

When talking about families, it's important to reflect the audiences' values around hard work paying off and having a fair chance. Therefore, the families' audiences most sympathize with are those who are:

- working
- or have lost their job
- or don't quite 'qualify'
- or are living in poor housing
- or don't have family /peer support systems

When talking about children, it's important to highlight not just how their basic needs are being unmet (though this is a useful starting point) but how they may be impacted in less ways that can have lifelong impacts:

- The impact of poverty on children's self-confidence, self-belief, aspiration, and mental health
- The discrimination and inequality they face that can impact their prospects in the future

- That the damage done in childhood can last forever

Other messengers

Having Save the Children deliver these messages didn't hinder our ability to land the poverty story in the way we predicted it might. Our hypothesis was that the public's pre-2020 decline in trust of charities¹³ may cause them to become suspicious of the reason for presenting the messaging. Although a small number of focus group participants asked whether the research was about fundraising for the charity, overall the respondents were favourable of having Save the Children being the messenger. The reason given was the feeling that, if poverty in the UK is being talked about by a well-known charity, it must be a serious and important problem.

However, charities and large organisations should be cautious about how, when and if they should themselves be the storyteller, as it can mean audiences see the stories through a charitable lens, which made them focus on charitable solutions instead of state ones.

Language

Poverty as escapable: poverty needs to be presented as solvable. Metaphors can be a powerful way of presenting the pressures that poverty can put on people, but they should always have an escape route. For example, often we see headlines about people being 'trapped in poverty'. While this language can help to paint a mental picture and prompt an emotional reaction to how restraining poverty is, it also attaches a hopelessness to poverty and a lack of agency to the individual experiencing it. Fluid and temporary language about people 'experiencing poverty' combined with the presentation of solutions to poverty is helpful.

Universal Credit (not 'benefits'): everyone's heard of it and although they don't necessarily know how it works, Universal Credit, on the whole was perceived as flawed. The term doesn't carry the same recipient-blaming baggage of benefits. Welfare either had a similar negative reaction or else prompted audiences to talk about other 'free' services such as education or healthcare. Universal Credit was a more specific and clear reference for audiences.

Our findings suggest these elements all connected with our audience segments, and when used, could have the potential to:

- shift people's perception of child poverty in the UK
- shift people's attitudes towards the need to tackle child poverty in the UK

We should also be mindful that barriers to changing people's perceptions around poverty can often be about audiences insulating themselves from poverty and feeling in control, however there is potential for the new narrative to overcome this and seek for adequate support to be in place instead.

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*A girl and her mum in front
of The Tightrope sculpture in
Stoke-On-Trent*
Photo by: Juanan Eguiguren / Save
The Children

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