Changing the story: a shared communications strategy for narrative change about homelessness in Tāmaki Makaurau

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DEVELOPED BY AUCKLAND'S HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS SECTOR



COORDINATED BY

housing first auckland

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Te Kaunihera o Tāmaki Makaurau

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About this report

This strategy was developed through the collective contributions of organisations and individuals across Auckland's housing, homelessness and community sectors. We acknowledge the knowledge, experience and perspectives shared by those who participated in the research, focus groups, communications stocktake and wānanga.

The development of this strategy was funded by Auckland Council and coordinated by Housing First Auckland Backbone.

The strategy draws on research and focus groups undertaken by Housing First Auckland Backbone, a communications stocktake, a wānanga held on 7 July 2026, and a narrative analysis of public discussion about homelessness.

The wānanga brought together Auckland-based housing and social-service leaders to agree the core priorities for a shared communications approach aimed at shifting the public narrative around homelessness in Tāmaki Makaurau. The narrative analysis complemented this work by examining how homelessness is currently being framed and understood across media, political discourse and sector perspectives, with a focus on rough sleeping, emergency housing and move-on orders.

Steering Group

The development of this strategy has been guided by a group bringing together leaders and representatives from across Auckland’s housing, homelessness, disability and community sectors.

- Amanda Kelly – Community Housing Aotearoa; Coalition to End Women’s Homelessness
- Ann-Marie Searchfield – Lifewise; Tāmaki Collaborative to End Homelessness
- Awatea Hawke – Housing First Auckland Backbone
- Bianca Johanson – Manaaki Rangatahi
- David Zussmann – Community Housing Aotearoa; Auckland Transitional Housing Network
- Fiona Hamilton – LinkPeople; Community Housing Aotearoa; Auckland Community Housing Provider Network
- Jan Rutledge – De Paul House; Auckland Transitional Housing Network
- Marlon Drake – Te Ohu Whakawhanaunga Tāmaki Makaurau
- Mike Potter – Disability Connect
- Simon Harger-Forde – Auckland City Mission – Te Tāpui Atawhai
- Tupara Morrison – Kāhui Tū Kaha
- Wendy Marr – Community Housing Aotearoa

Project Lead

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Wānanga Facilitator

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This strategy was developed through engagement with Auckland's housing and homelessness sector, including tangata whenua organisations, but did not include wider mana whenua consultation.

Executive summary

Right now, housing insecurity is deeply impacting a broad cross-section of New Zealanders. The combined impacts of trauma and financial insecurity are contributing to homelessness.

The intent of this strategy is to set out how Auckland's housing and social-service sector can work together to shift what Aucklanders believe is true, and acceptable, about homelessness in their city. It is also intended to evidence the solutions that already exist and acknowledge the collaboration already taking place to prevent and end homelessness.

It has been commissioned out of a recognition that data and communications are core pillars of systems change, but that there has been a gap when it comes to shared, reliable data and key messages. While progress has been made on data through various national and local initiatives, including the National Homelessness Data Project, this is the first response to the call for shared messages and communications support.

The strategic challenge.

Awareness of homelessness in Auckland is not the problem; *belief in the solvability of homelessness is.*

Previous research undertaken by the Backbone , supported by Auckland Council, shows that the Auckland public is already with the sector on the issue - 88% of respondents seeing homelessness as serious, and 78% considering it a whole-of-society issue. But the story is finely balanced. More than half believe homelessness can only be managed, never prevented, and the public debate is currently dominated by a framing of homelessness as a problem of disorder rather than a problem of inadequate housing and supports (see Appendix 1: Narrative Analysis).

In addition, **Dr Cordelia Stewart of Auckland University of Technology, with the support of Auckland Council, recently undertook interviews** with 55 people from across the region facing higher – but also differing – housing needs. Interviewees included Māori, Pasifika, Rainbow, neurodivergent and disabled people, as well as women and mothers. The interviews highlight how failures across government and social systems contribute to homelessness. Barriers to stability and independence are numerous and often outside of the control of people experiencing homelessness. For many, the barriers are a result of a lack of coordination by different parts of the social support system. When that story is obscured by a narrative about individual choices, it is harder for solutions-focused stories to get told. This research is due to be published early 2027.

The strategic response.

We cannot shift perceptions about homelessness and whether it is solvable by out-arguing one decisionmaker, a single campaign or media article. We can only do that by working together over time to *shift the shared values that establish what is politically and socially acceptable.*

This document forms the bedrock of that strategic response: the shared understanding, values and language that can be used by the wānanga participants and the sector more broadly to help change the story.

The foundation.

The wānanga produced a set of commitments - “we will” statements that bind both the strategy and the participants to one another, conceptualised as a whare. These commitments are strengths-based, grounded in te ao Māori and Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and rooted in Aotearoa. They place lived experience at the heart of the sector's storytelling and provide the foundation for the messaging, evidence and actions that follow.

These commitments are complemented by the findings of the perceptions survey and the focus groups undertaken by the Backbone in 2025.

What this document does.

It establishes the shared context and language (including a glossary of what a communications strategy is, and is not), maps the audiences and ways to reach them, and creates the messaging architecture that can be used by organisations individually or in collaboration.

The invitation.

This strategy is an invitation, not a directive. What it offers is common ground: enough shared messages and positions to stand together, so that the sector’s many voices move in the same direction while maintaining decision-making over their own communications choices.

By consistently showing people what action and solutions look like in our storytelling and advocacy, we can counter harmful narratives.

Strategic context

The case for a shared communications approach: a sector rich in reach and impact, but fragmented in voice

The survey, communications stocktake, and wānanga highlighted key reasons why a shared communications approach is of benefit to organisations supporting people experiencing homelessness:

- **A system that rewards competition over collaboration.** The funding environment pushes organisations to compete, which can work against a shared voice. "Disjointed" was a term that came up consistently.
- **Uneven communications capacity.** Resources and capacity for communications and advocacy vary widely across organisations. Some have fully staffed communications teams and multiple channels; some rely on a senior leader undertaking communications alongside their regular responsibilities; some have elected not to participate in proactive communications to date.
- **"Default othering".** A deeply held concern about retraumatising people means a reluctance to put those with experience of homelessness into the public eye through the media or social media. This means lived experience is often filtered through providers or is unheard, which can lead to "default othering" as described by one participant in the wānanga.
- **A media that "cherry-picks" voices.** There is a perception that journalists tend to select mainstream or tauiwi organisations (often, though not always, the larger ones), narrowing whose perspective is heard.
- **Shared messages strengthen the sector and counter harmful narratives.** Having some messages in common both builds sector relationships (countering some of the concern about "cherry-picking" above) and pushes back on dehumanising public narratives.
- **Hidden homelessness is invisible - but not rare.** Sixty-three per cent of respondents believe street homelessness is more common, when in fact hidden homelessness is far more widespread. By connecting people to the full range of homelessness experiences - not just the visible ones - we help them recognise how close to home this issue really is.

The external strategic communications context impacts who hears our messages and how.

NZ On Air's *Where Are the Audiences 2026* report confirms that no single channel will reach all our audiences. Audiences are fragmented more than ever across platforms and generations. Older New Zealanders are still reached by linear TV and radio, while younger, Māori and Pacific audiences are reached online and through AI news curation. That means a message must be built to travel across multiple platforms if it is going to shift mindsets over time.

This strengthens the case for a more collective approach. No single organisation can be present across every single communications channel, but a sector sharing and amplifying data, insights and stories can.

Glossary: what a communications strategy is and isn't

It is important to state up front what a communications strategy is and what it isn't. These three terms are often used interchangeably, but they are not the same thing, and the order matters:

- **Communications strategy (the bedrock):** The foundation. It defines the shared understanding, values, language, recommended audiences and channels. It is enduring, not time-bound, and its objective here is narrative change. This document is that strategy.
- **Campaign:** Time-bound and goal-specific - a coordinated push toward a particular ask or moment, built on the strategy, with a start, an end and a measurable target. A campaign is not a strategy; it sits on top of one.
- **Media relations plan:** A single tactic - managing relationships with journalists, pitching stories, earning coverage and handling reactive media. It is usually deployed alongside a campaign and is never a substitute for a strategy.

Key terms used in this strategy:

- **Collective voice -** The shared, coordinated voice of those using this strategy, moving in the same direction with messages and a shared commitment.
- **Discourse analysis -** A structured reading of how an issue is spoken about - pronouns, concrete versus abstract language, verbs, vocabulary and recurring patterns - to reveal whose frame is winning. Heft's analysis of 77 sources underpins this strategy (see Appendix 1).
- **Framing -** The angle through which an issue is understood. The central frame contest here is whether homelessness is a "problem of disorder" (to be policed and moved on) or a "problem of housing" (to be solved with homes and support).
- **Homelessness/Severe Housing Deprivation** – In New Zealand, Statistics New Zealand defines homelessness as severe housing deprivation, which includes without shelter, temporary accommodation, sharing accommodation, and uninhabitable housing. Most audiences will be focused on rough sleeping/living without shelter.
- **Lived experience -** The knowledge and authority of people who have experienced homelessness - held at the heart of this strategy's storytelling, heard unfiltered rather than through a provider lens. It is both a counter to dehumanising narratives and a professional practice (peer support), and must be engaged with care, because "voices of lived experience" can also be used in ways that "other" people.

- **“Move the rock” (the rock and the balloon) -** Daniel Hunter’s metaphor. Politicians are a balloon tied to a rock; the rock is people’s activated shared values. Lobbying one decision-maker - swatting the balloon - is short-term and easily reversed. Shifting shared values - moving the rock - moves every decision-maker in the same direction at once. The strategy’s job is to move the rock.
- **Narrative** - The story a community tells itself about how the world works: who belongs, who's to blame, what's possible, what's acceptable. Not a message. Not a slogan. Narrative sets the boundaries of what decision-makers can and can't do.
- **Narrative change -** Shifting that underlying story so that better policy and public responses become possible. It is the objective of this strategy.
- **Te ao Māori-led** – Led through Māori knowledge, values, and cultural practices.
- **Te Tiriti-based communications -** Grounding communications in Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the relationship and obligations it establishes.
- **Values** - What a community already believes, waiting to be named and put to work. Narrative change doesn't recite the problem and hope the values speak for themselves - it names the value being violated and gives people a way to act on it.

The commitments: the foundation of our messaging house

The wānanga synthesised the sector’s strategic priorities, which Heft has reframed as commitments - “we will” statements that serve as a commitment to the strategy itself, and of the participants to one another.

1. **Whāia te Moemoeā -** we will actively pursue our dream of a more just Aotearoa through our communications.
2. Our communications will be grounded in Te Ao Māori and Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and based on our shared values of manaakitanga, aroha, tika, and pono.
3. We will focus on what unites us - the shared aspiration for everyone to have a place of belonging and home.
4. We will ensure lived experience is at the heart of our storytelling.
5. We will base our advocacy on quality research and evidence about the solutions that work.
6. We will focus on connecting to the hearts of our diverse communities.

To bring these commitments to life, they have been applied to the messaging architecture, the recommendations about where audiences can be reached and how, and the protocols and guidance provided in the toolkit – particularly where working with those who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness is concerned.

They can also serve as guidance for the governance of collaborative campaigns or other communication approaches like an individual organisation's media plan or direct community engagement.

Commitment to lived experience. Lived experience should be viewed as a source of expertise, leadership, wisdom, and strategic insight. The research shows us that the stories of people's lives are the single most powerful way to connect our communities with the realities of homelessness. However, There is a risk that, in responding to this, people are reduced to sound bites or their stories are shared without their full consent. This strategy recommends that communications approaches ensure people with lived experience decide which stories are told, how and who they are told by, and what solutions are advanced. Protocols are included below and a guide to ethical media engagement is provided in the toolkit.

Commitment to te ao Māori and Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Te ao Māori brings knowledge, values, leadership and approaches that are fundamental to preventing and ending homelessness. Our communications will recognise and draw on this expertise, while upholding our commitments to Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Manaakitanga and Kaitiakitanga: supporting collective voice in practice

How collaborative communications works in practice

Collective voice doesn't require every organisation to do the same thing. It works because organisations have different roles within the sector, and each can contribute to sharing key messages through their own channels and approaches.

Decision-rights, mandate, and escalation - who is authorised to speak on behalf of any one group, and how disagreements are resolved - sit outside this strategy and with individual programmes of work or collectives.

This strategy guides the way that this governance can be established by applying the values of:

- **Rangatiratanga**: Respecting the mana motuhake of participating organisations, including their autonomy to speak on issues, maintain relationships and determine their own communications and advocacy approaches.
- **Manaakitanga:** uplifting the mana of individuals and the collective work of the sector, and
- **Kaitiakitanga:** stewarding the stories of people's lives and the solutions that work with care over the long term.

A high-level outline of roles and responsibilities is included below, as well as protocols for ensuring an ethical approach to lived experience stories.

Communications roles in the housing and social services sectors

Peak bodies

- Maintain relationships with officials as part of their roles as membership organisations.
- Can absorb the visibility and scrutiny that comes with public advocacy, freeing other organisations to focus on service delivery.

Advocacy organisations or change movements

- Bring community- or cohort-specific insight that keeps collective messaging grounded and relevant - helping shared narratives land for the communities they work with, rather than flattening into a single generic voice.
- Can co-sign, amplify, or contribute data and case studies to a collective effort without needing to front it themselves.

Frontline providers

- Hold relationships with decisionmakers and officials.
- Closest to lived experience, and the source of the grounded stories and real-time insight that give collective advocacy its credibility.
- Able to contribute stories, spokespeople, and data and evidence.

Collaborating with people with lived experience: recognising them as leaders

The research and community hui undertaken by the Backbone show that Aucklanders connect with the stories of people with lived experience. It is also well-established that the media often prefers the stories of people unfiltered by organisations or third-party advocates.

However, not everyone is ready or willing to tell their story, and the full burden of storytelling should not fall on those already facing the burden of system failures.

In addition, a focus on lived experience storytelling can unintentionally position people as *subjects* of experience rather than holders of knowledge, expertise, and solutions.

Therefore, taking a considered approach to amplifying the voices of lived experience is critical, and requires:

- Time
- In-person support
- Strong understanding of cultural context
- The ability to adapt

It also requires a proactive commitment to making space for lived experience leadership in shaping messages and advocacy.

A step-by-step guide for getting consent for a media interview is provided in the supporting toolkit.

Messaging architecture: the pillars and roof of the house

Messages that land, focused on solutions that work

This section sets out the core story and key messages that can be used across our audiences and channels to show our audiences that preventing and ending homelessness in Auckland is possible. Detailed, audience-specific messages are provided in the supporting toolkit

Core narrative: changing the story from problem to solution

The core story brings those experiencing homelessness into the "we" and centres solutions that work:

> *Everyone deserves a place to call home - somewhere to find their feet, feel safe, and build a future. Yet too many Aucklanders are going without one, living in unsafe conditions that often stay hidden from view.*
>
> *But we know how to solve that. When homes are available, warm, safe, and affordable - and support is there when people need it - whole communities become stronger, healthier, and more connected.*
>
> *This isn't about one group solving it for another - it's what we can achieve together, by investing in what works. That's how we prevent and end homelessness.*

Key message 1: Homes end homelessness. Let's invest in them.

The key solution to a housing need is more housing - secure, affordable, accessible, and available without a mountain of conditions to meet first.

Key message 2: A home lasts long-term when the person in it feels secure. That takes a coordinated approach to support.

People stay housed when health, income and social supports are connected around them. Right now, those services often operate separately, and a sudden change in circumstances can be enough to push someone into homelessness. Joined-up, wraparound support, alongside connection to whānau, hapū, iwi and community, closes that gap. The evidence shows it works.

Key message 3: With a secure home and coordinated support, people can build the lives they aspire to.

A stable, affordable home isn't just shelter - it's the ground people need under their feet to find work, care for their families, and belong to a community. When we invest in homes, we're investing in people's ability to live with dignity and contribute to Auckland.

Key message 4: Ending homelessness is the fiscally responsible choice, not just the compassionate one.

Each year that we manage homelessness rather than end it, we spend more and achieve less. The evidence is clear that housing people with the right support saves public money across health and crisis services. This isn't a choice between doing the right thing and doing the affordable thing. They're the same thing.

Key message 5: Te ao Māori-led solutions put people at the centre and they work, not just for Māori, but for everyone.

Taking a te ao Māori-led approach serves all our communities. Research shows tangata whenua-led solutions for whānau Māori are critical to preventing homelessness and that holistic, te ao Māori-informed responses work for others too.

Language guidance

- **Solutions, not complexities.** Whenever we talk about complex needs and complex systems, we're reinforcing the idea that homelessness isn't solvable. Instead, talk about specific challenges that require a specific response, and highlight which responses are working.
- **Lead with stories, back up with statistics.** Stories move people more than numbers.
- **Use collective, humanising language.** For example, "housing is a human need" was shown to land better during focus groups than the framing "housing is a human right". However, it should be noted that there are times when rights-based language is impactful and appropriate.
- **Speak in "can," not only "should".**
- **Avoid partisan blame.** Shared responsibility framing outperforms attacking politicians - focus on shared values.
- **Replace inevitability with solvability.** Name that homelessness is preventable, point to proven models, and give people a concrete action they can take.

- **"Homes" and "housing".** Use “home” wherever possible in public-facing material to connect with the public. “Housing” is generally a sector term, whereas “home” is more universally understood.

Audience and channels

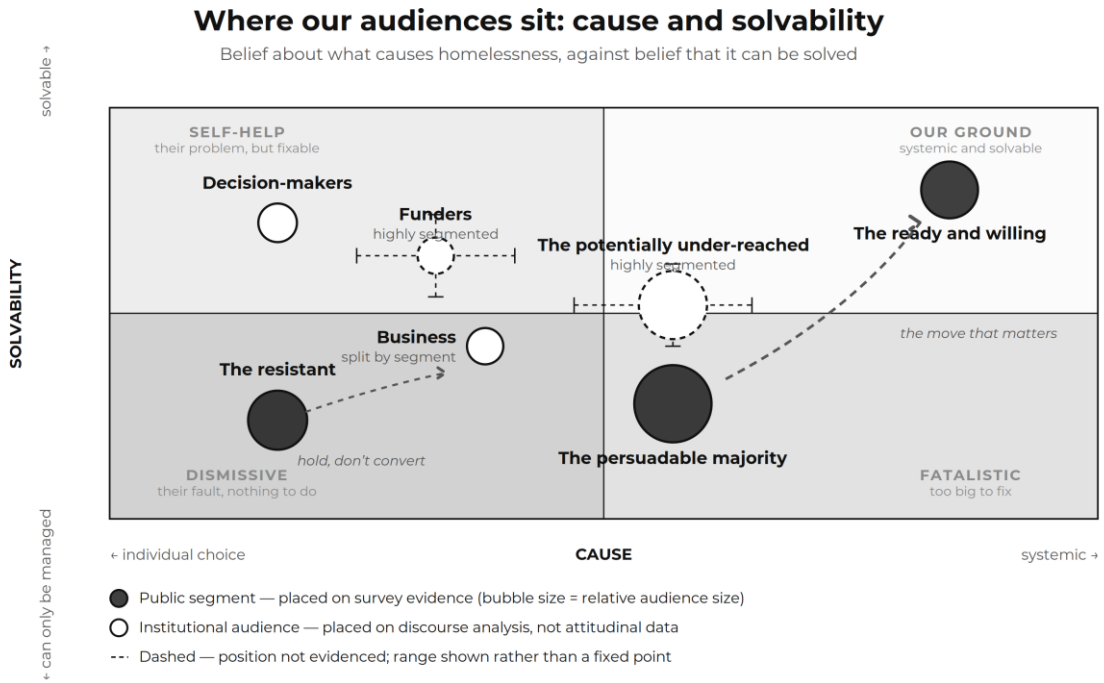
Understanding who we're talking to, and how we reach them

This section sets out who the sector is trying to reach, what each audience needs to hear, and high-level guidance on where to reach them.

Audience segments have been created based on the survey, the focus groups, and the wānanga. Which audience to focus on will depend on the context of any campaign, media plan, or joint initiative.

Given that this strategy is focused on shifting mindsets, our key audience is the persuadable majority, those most likely to respond to shared values and solutions-focused messaging. So, it is always important to think about how to reach the persuadable majority through shared values and human stories in any media plan or campaign. They are prioritised below.

Audience segments



Decision-makers and businesses are positioned in the table based on the prevalence of the disorder framing.

Audience	What they need to hear	Why it matters	What the evidence tells us
The persuadable majority	Homelessness is a solvable, systemic issue, and we have proof it has been solved, not a personal failing or a threat to public order	Public belief shapes what politicians feel safe doing. This is the largest single audience and the largest single barrier	88% already say homelessness is serious, but 55% believe it can only be managed, not prevented. Only 43% are confident it can be reduced.
The ready and willing	Not persuasion that the issue matters, but pathways for taking action: here is where to go for information, what to do, and how to add your voice	This group has the highest mobilisation potential for a campaign and are the closest to homelessness through higher reported instances of housing precarity	Māori 63% proximity and 80% say top priority; Pacific peoples 57% proximity and 88% recognise society-wide impact; 18–29s 75% top priority. Both groups most likely to reject "there's nothing I can personally do"
The potentially under-reached	We don’t want housing insecurity to impact your ability to build a life here – and there is a place for you in ensuring that	They are a growing proportion of the population, many of whom may have skills, solutions or experiences to share	Tauiwi communities in Auckland, particularly migrants and refugees, are potentially important allies not well-canvased in the research this is based on.
The resistant	Nobody chooses to end up without a home. Too often it happens when the systems meant to catch people - mental health services, prisons - discharge them with nowhere to go. There are proven alternatives: getting people into stable homes and creating the right support around them so they don't fall through the gaps again.	We want to avoid this group becoming active opposition	63% of 50–64s say homelessness can only be managed; 45% have taken no action; 60% of men attribute homelessness to individual choices.

Audience	What they need to hear	Why it matters	What the evidence tells us
Decision-makers	Clear evidence, workable solutions, and a united sector voice rather than competing asks — accountability framing, not blame The system cost of doing nothing: hospitals, police, emergency housing, and the $88,000 per person each year we already spend	They act on what's politically safe and well-evidenced. Public expectation is already on our side	62% look to central government to lead, 39% to council. But all three focus groups rejected messaging that attacks politicians
Businesses and employers	Homelessness affects their staff, customers, and neighbourhoods, and there's a constructive role for them to play	A source of advocacy and practical partnership where they can play a part in creating solutions with the sector	Only 5% of Aucklanders see business as responsible - low expectation, which makes visible business action more notable, not less
Funders and philanthropic partners	Evidence of impact and a credible, coordinated sector	Helps to sustain and grow the resourcing base	The 50+ group independently raised the need to attract funding for a public campaign and named potential donors

Channel guidance

- **If your audience is the persuadable public** → mainstream media remains the primary route, supported by owned channels. Journalists connecting directly with audiences on Substack and YouTube have increasingly sizable audiences and should be factored into a media plan.
- **If your audience is under 35** → social platforms (TikTok, Instagram), street posters and physical placement for those off social, community-level storytelling platforms. Humour and creative approaches are welcomed here, and accessibility is increasingly an expectation, not a nice-to-have.
- **If your audience is 35–50** → Facebook for community reach, LinkedIn for professional networks, email and text for direct information, Out-of-home advertising (billboards) for broad visibility, community meetings and local board engagement. This group specifically asked for practical "how to help" information in the focus groups - the single clearest content gap identified across the research.
- **If your audience is 50+** → traditional media, community networks, faith-based organisations and churches, unions and industry associations, libraries and community events. This group

has the strongest civic and professional networks in the research and represents significant mobilisation potential for campaigns.

- **If your audience is decisionmakers** → direct briefings, written submissions and short evidence-based one-pagers. Go in aligned with others where possible.
- **If your audience is business** → partnership stories, LinkedIn, employer-network events.
- **If your audience is funders** → direct relationship and impact reporting.

Accessibility

Accessibility isn't a checkbox - it's increasingly a standing expectation across every piece of communications and channel. That means plain language, accessible visuals, and formats that work across diverse audiences, including NZSL where possible.

Resourcing channels

You don't need a full channel plan, just clarity of purpose:

- **Focus, don't cover.** Pick one or two audiences that matter most to your mahi and concentrate on the channels that reach them best.
- **Borrow, don't build.** Use the strategy's shared messaging and request permission to use others' assets where appropriate – illustrations, data - instead of starting from scratch.

Appendix 1: Narrative and discourse analysis

The full narrative and discourse analysis is provided as a separate appendix to this strategy. It examines the competing frames (“disorder” versus “housing”), the features of the language (pronouns, concreteness versus abstraction, verbs, vocabulary and patterns), the emerging motifs, and the interactive context, and it grounds the language guidance.