

# Communicating the cost-of-living crisis...

## A guide for charities and the third sector

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# Chapter 1: How the cost-of-living crisis has impacted communications and how the industry can help

## The role of PR in sharing information and connecting communities with resources and support

Whether you work in-house or in agency, the UK's cost-of-living crisis will have already had an impact on your comms strategy as well as the tone of your messaging to the public, clients and colleagues.

With the financial pressures on Brits only set to increase over the following months amid changing temperatures, uncertainty is being fuelled by the change in political leadership and the ongoing pandemic. Communications and actions from all organisations need to be clear.

Charity teams have had to switch their campaigns and refocus their support – in Chapters 2 and 3, NSPCC, FareShare and Refuge discuss how to manage media and political relations and director of PR and public affairs for Maggie's Katie Tait talks re-strategising.

With the right positioning and context, brands can help their local communities through the crisis. In Chapter 4, senior digital PR strategist Rosie MacDonald shares how the Love Energy Saving's team are supporting food parcels for local groups.

Chapter 5 features Third Force News' editor Graham Martin who offers advice to charities and organisations struggling to gain coverage for their campaigns during such a busy news cycle.

Reporting how cost-of-living pressure intersects with existing strains on disabled people across the UK, freelance journalist, author and Sibs charity chair Saba Salman shares how she works to inform in Chapter 6.

Chapter 7 has a round-up of best-practice tips from PR and comms experts for specific advice on ensuring your messaging has impact.

With financial pressures set to increase over the following months in the UK, PR teams across all sectors will have to replan their communications in line with the ever-changing circumstances of their audiences.

Agility and sensitivity is a must. Here is where public relations and comms teams can make a real difference, aiding people in finding help and extra support during a difficult time for the country.



# Chapter 2: Changing media and political relations

## NSPCC, FareShare and Refuge share how their priorities have changed and how they work with the media and the Government

Charities have had to rethink media strategies, budgets, workflow and lobbying as priorities change throughout the cost-of-living crisis in the UK.

For the Vuelio webinar 'Communicating the cost-of-living for charities', [FareShare](#) public affairs, comms and PR consultant Ali Gourley, [NSPCC](#) national media manager Harry Watkinson and [Refuge](#) head of media and campaigns Kim Manning-Cooper shared how their communications and approaches have had to change and how their teams are keeping campaigns high on the news agenda and in front of key decision makers.

[Watch the full webinar recording here.](#)

## Comms plans need to evolve with the changing needs of the public

Each charity represented on our webinar panel has seen how the current economic climate is directly impacting their community. As a result, their workloads and focus have had to change.

'A big concern for us has been how domestic abuse survivors will be impacted by the current crisis,' shared Refuge's Kim Manning-Cooper.

'Economic abuse is significant. Money being withheld, people being unable to access work and education. We know that many survivors will be recipients of Universal Credit, and that when they flee, they will have to renew it – the cost-of-living crisis could be a barrier to them leaving.'

'We [surveyed](#) frontline staff across emergency refuges and services – 92% said that the cost-of-living crisis is already pushing survivors further into debt. Survivors are faced with an impossible choice between staying and poverty.'

'We expect to see an increase in demand for our services.'

## Campaign timelines have had to change alongside changing priorities

'From a policy perspective, poverty wasn't traditionally a core priority for NSPCC campaigning,' said the charity's national media manager Harry Watkinson. 'Now there is growing evidence that poverty, abuse and neglect are related.'

'The crisis is influencing how our policy team are working. From a media perspective, journalists are thinking about today, or at a push, next week.'

We're still pushing out stories that have been in the planner, but it is like a tsunami; the earthquake has hit, and we're waiting for the next wave – October, when energy bills start rolling in.

## Journalists need more from comms teams now

The lessons the NSPCC team learned during the pandemic about what journalists need from organisations providing support are proving useful during the current crisis – the media needs hard evidence of its impacts.

'Journalists want evidence on how the financial crisis is impacting the work that we do,' said Watkinson. 'In a normal situation, we would give six-month or annual updates on data from our helpline. Now, we're doing quarterly and monthly updates on physical, domestic and emotional abuse. I'd say, be prepared for the fact they will keep coming back for updates – it is no longer just an annual thing.'



While the media will be saturated with cost-of-living-related stories over the next few months, there will be room for other stories from charities, says Watkinson:

‘There will still be scope to put more ‘normal’ stories out, unrelated to the cost-of-living crisis. Moments when journalists are looking for something more uplifting. Having the evidence ready so you can play a relevant part in the media debate and being able to provide alternative narratives from time to time – that is important for charities and supporters.’

#### **Bigger asks of politicians**

FareShare’s network of charitable food redistributors are feeling the increased financial pressures – a pivot in its public affairs strategy was needed.

‘We are changing our ask from the Government,’ said Ali Gourley. ‘It costs us more to get food out now and there are more people in food insecurity. We are going out to our industry partners, we have more people at our doors – we need more food.’

‘The current situation has changed how we’re positioning ourselves and how we talk to people.’

#### **Working together to make an impact**

With messaging from a myriad of charities hitting the media, public and politicians so regularly right now, making an impact among all the noise is a challenge. To achieve common goals, team ups with other organisations can get campaigns more attention.

‘It can be done with open letters,’ advises Ali, using FareShare’s collaboration with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation as an example.

‘All charities have their own agenda, but if common ground can be found, it is doable. Presenting a united front, from a political and campaigning perspective – it definitely works.’

**Find out more about Refuge’s survey on how the cost-of-living crisis is impacting domestic abuse survivors [here](#).**





# Chapter 3: Meeting the needs of your community

## Director of PR and public affairs for Maggie's Katie Tait on additional nationwide strains caused by the financial crisis in the UK

As budgets are being carefully considered and replanned in homes across the country, charities across all sectors are quickly redistributing their resources to help. One charity pivoting to keep up with the evolving needs of their community right now is Maggie's – 'everyone's home of cancer care', which provides free support and information in centres across the UK as well as online.

### 'People are more afraid of paying bills than their cancer diagnosis'

'We are hearing a huge range of devastating stories from our centre visitors across the UK of how the crisis is hitting them hard. People with cancer already face a financial burden because of reduced income from

being off work or unable to apply for work, greater heating (or, this summer, cooling) needs because of treatment and being at home during the day as well as dietary requirements. Added to that – the travel costs of getting to their appointments.

'Our benefits advisers are seeing unprecedented demand and they can always find all the different pots of money available but sometimes someone is already receiving all they can. That's where Maggie's is so good – because of our wrap-around care, we can support them through the stress and anxiety that living on a severely reduced budget brings. We are hearing of people stopping treatment early or delaying treatment because of travel costs and our cancer support specialists can help them with those decisions and how to know what to prioritise.

'Everyone is feeling the cost-of-living crisis but our unique challenge is in making sure people with cancer

and their families are prioritised. During COVID, we drove home the message that people with cancer were being forgotten through delayed treatments and surgery and that got a lot of traction.

'We are now seeing the same thing and our message is the same. People with cancer must be prioritised because of the life situation they are in. When you are given a cancer diagnosis, you should not be scared that you are not going to be able to pay your bills.

'Our recent press campaign and survey on how the cost-of-living crisis is impacting people with cancer got a lot of media attention. We invested in research and a survey with OnePoll which found a really strong and shocking headline figure of people being more afraid of paying bills than their cancer diagnosis. We landed our research in the same week as the Ofgem report which meant there was a lot of noise around cost-of-living and so our quotes and figures and case

studies got picked up everywhere. We had a strong CEO statement and our centre visitors lined up for interviews.

'It really bought home how critical the cost-of-living crisis was going to be for people living with cancer and with it our message that Maggie's was here for everyone.

'For being heard by politicians and changemakers – find some champions. Our relationship with Tonia Antoniazzi, the chair of the APPG on Cancer, meant we had a Parliamentary reception in Westminster, set up an early day motion on the importance of our support for carers and could be introduced to other MPs. The same goes for Tracey Crouch, whose experience of cancer meant she really understood what Maggie's is trying to achieve.



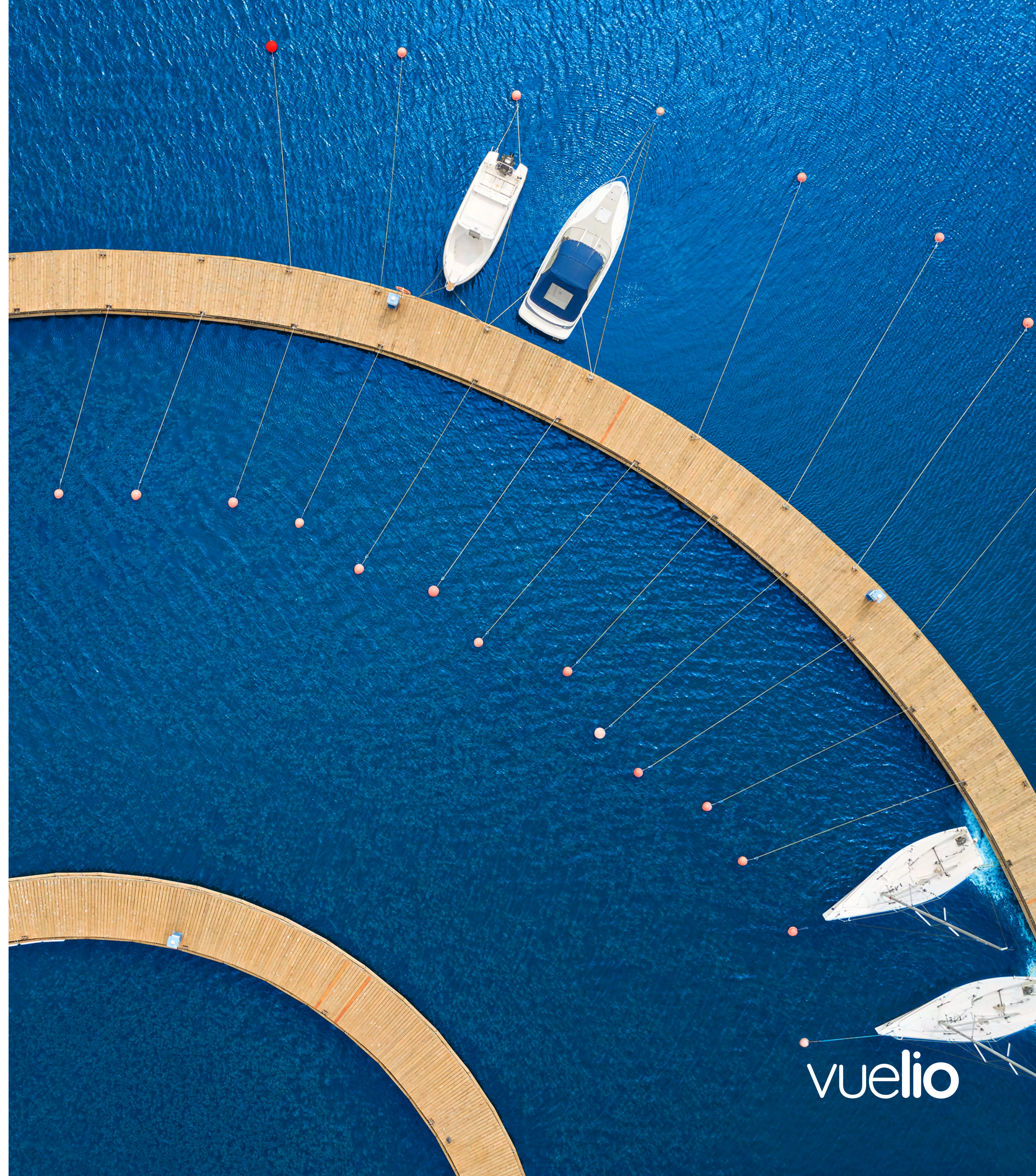
'We made sure we had all the components ready to go at launch for our campaigns – we had case studies, spokespeople briefed, regional breakdowns of our data and ready-made social media content all prepared so that when we issued our release, we could respond to incoming requests straight away. We also had a statement from our CEO that summarised the press release, including key data that we could send out reactively to any other cost-of-living stories as it's such a hot topic.'

'I think the media is doing a great job in covering how the cost-of-living crisis is impacting normal people. Broadcast media is the best way to hear real people's stories, so for us having people who were happy to be interviewed on the TV and radio was important and hearing those stories straight from the people living them helps to bring home how hard the situation is.'

'The place that the real conversation is happening though is social media. Our Facebook posts, in particular, got a lot of attention and some really heart-breaking responses – all of which we can follow up with directly to make sure we are supporting them as much as we can.'

'PR and comms are imperative for helping the public and getting changes made to policy. Getting such a wide range of media outlets meant we were reaching nearly one million people with direct information about people with cancer and the cost-of-living. As we all know, an editorial carries far more punch than an advertorial – getting that Third Party Endorsement from media really does make an impact.'

**Read Maggie's [full report](#) on how bills are impacting those fighting cancer across the UK.**





# Chapter 4: Collaborating with charities

**Love Energy Savings' senior digital PR strategist Rosie MacDonald on supporting local communities**

**'When a campaign takes root within the heart of the community, you are laying the foundations'**

In an effort to help those struggling in the Greater Manchester area during the cost-of-living crisis, the business utilities and price comparison retailer Love Energy Savings has teamed up with Lancashire-based brands to make a real difference.

'We wanted to help provide one meal each working day to as many school children in Bolton during the summer holidays as possible.

'More than a third of Bolton's children are living in poverty and almost half (46%) of children living in the Bolton South East were living in poverty in 2020/21 – a figure which has only increased since the cost-of-living crisis started.

'Working with other Lancashire-local brands, like [Robinsons](#), [Dewlay](#) and [Fiddler's Lancashire Crisps](#), we have put together donations to be circulated by [Bolton Lads and Girls Club](#), a charity very dear to our hearts which helps provide activities, care and support to children and their families in the Greater-Manchester area. These meals are then delivered by a different Love Energy Savings volunteer each day and given to those who need it most.

'We made sure to divide the donation requests into incredibly small quantities per brand, so that what we were asking for was so minute it would be difficult to refuse.

'The logistical planning of getting all the food donations into the packed lunches and delivered by an LES volunteer each day to Bolton Lads and Girls Club for distribution was the initial hurdle, but the real challenge,

funnily enough, was persuading local businesses that we weren't trying to sell them anything.

'It's understandable why many would be wary of an ulterior motive, which is why we asked very small businesses for a significantly smaller quantity of items than a larger brand, which enabled them to get involved and still have their brand name attached to the project, should they wish. One local brand (Dewlay), actually donated double the amount of product that we asked for because of this.

'We hope that when the campaign reaches its conclusion, one of these will be the increased awareness drawn to the issue of child poverty in the Greater Manchester area. However, it is already evident that one of the biggest wins will be the relationships forged with fellow Lancashire brands. Building those relationships and contacts will enable us to do campaigns on a larger scale in the future.

'This will ensure that when we're setting the next campaign into motion, we can point to the success of the previous and embark on a bigger, bolder endeavour.

'Understanding the angles within your campaign is always step one when approaching the media. Once you understand the audience you can target accordingly. Different emails tailored for each angle and for each individual, coupled with follow-up phone calls is a winner.

'Research is also vital. Knowing the right person to target, the right publication and timing are all factors that need to be juggled to achieve coverage success. Common sense is key for ensuring your approach is sensible and sensitive, especially with language.



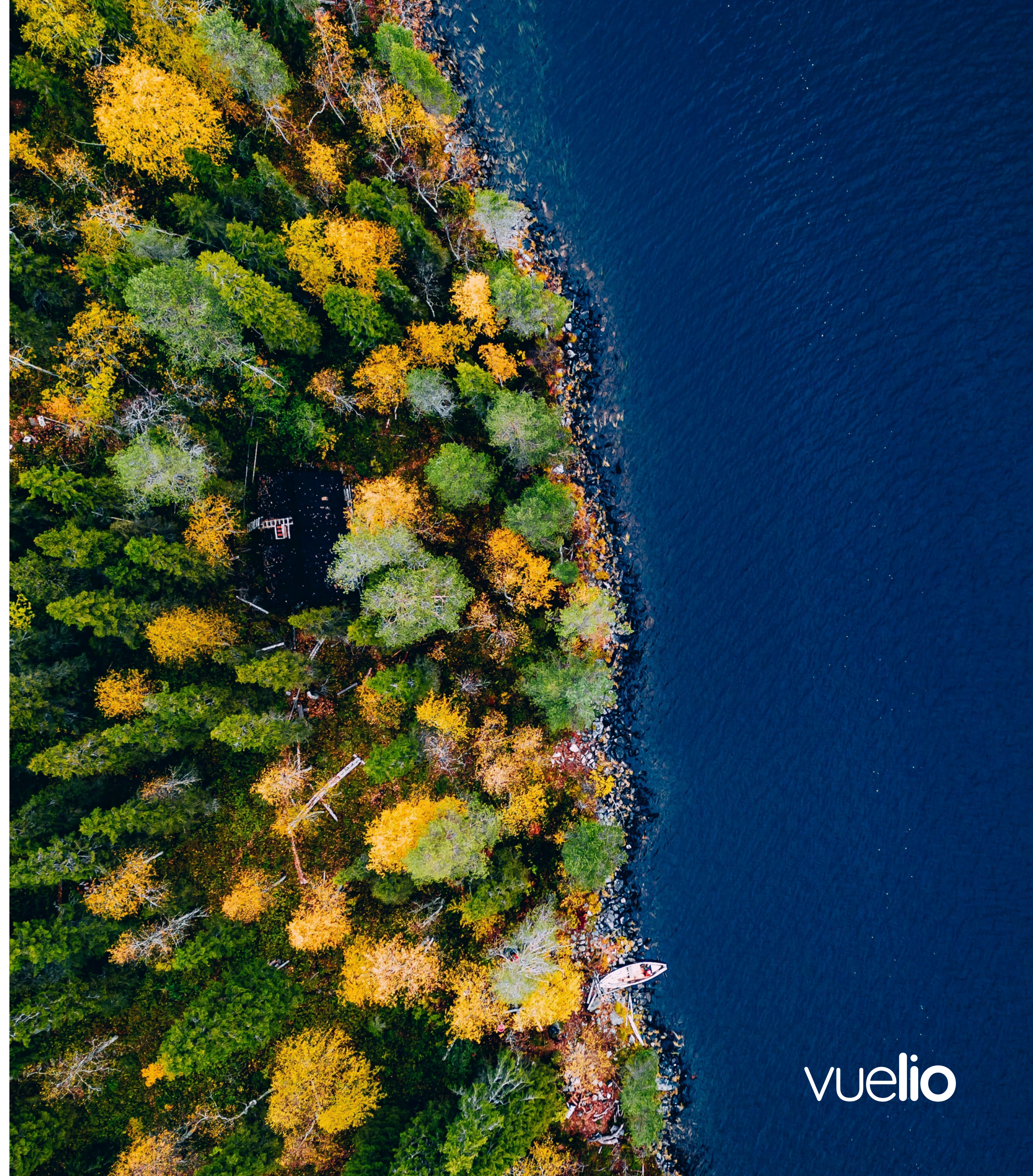
‘Words like ‘impoverished’, ‘lower-class’, or any phrase that could bear negative connotations or pigeon-hole are an absolute no-go.

‘It’s also vital to treat the people you’re trying to help like people. It can be tempting to over-egg a story to play at the heartstrings of the public, but this has to be weighted with understanding that you aren’t just quoting statistics – these are real people’s lives.

‘When looking for case studies, forums and Facebook groups are a brilliant place to go to reach out, in addition to submitting case study [ResponseSource Journalist Enquiry Service](#) requests. Approach-wise, it’s always so important to be gentle and position your request as an opportunity for them to help share their story to shed a light on how bad the situation is for others – this goes hand in hand with acknowledgement.

‘Understanding the difficulties and possible pride, shame or anguish that can be wrapped up in someone speaking to you is so important. Sensitivity will always get you further.

‘During this crisis, PR and comms are incredibly important. PR is the ‘man behind the curtain’ of the media – pushing for the right attention, ensuring journalists hear about the relevant news, the latest facts and figures. Without PR, a significant amount of information would never be seen by the general public.





# Chapter 5: How to get coverage for your campaigns

## Third Force News editor Graham Martin shares how charities can be featured in the media

As the news agenda has to keep pace with what the public needs to know in planning for winter, the media is doing its best to cover the issue from all angles – reporting on the impact on energy bills to the price of fish.

Third Force News (TFN) editor Graham Martin shares how charities can get their campaigns covered.

‘For us, the crisis has three linked strands. First, we cover the work the voluntary sector is doing to highlight the extent of the crisis as it unfolds. Then we look at how the voluntary sector is helping people practically. Finally – and crucially for us – we report on the challenges the crisis will/is posing for charities in terms of how and indeed whether they can operate – rocketing fuel bills being a particular concern.

‘There has been a steady increase in comms from charities as the year has gone on and a big uptick in these recently. Releases from charities are becoming more common and this kind of messaging will only increase.

‘Charities need to speak up more for themselves as well as their service users – the wellbeing of both is intertwined. I’m not sure if the parlous state of many charities is being communicated well enough, or if people understand completely what could be lost.

‘It is essential this messaging gets out. We hear a lot about the problems besetting charities, but it can be very difficult to get organisations to go on the record. I think there is concern about this causing issues with supporters, with funders and in fundraising. Also, the vast majority of charities are small operations with no big comms teams – and these are the most vulnerable but also the most vital at a local level – and they are

the most vulnerable to cost-of-living pressures.

Sometimes a media request has to go through a byzantine committee process before you get anything back, even a ‘no comment’. Smaller charities could do with some training in how to tell their stories – and this is something we are looking at providing through TFN, though our own resources are also stretched.

‘Be bold and confident with the stories you have to tell – charities are at the sharp end of everything and they are unparalleled as sources.

‘We are kicking TFN into campaigning mode over how the cost-of-living is impacting on the voluntary sector – so watch this space...’

Keep up with the third sector on the Third Force News (TFN) website: [fn.scot](https://fn.scot).



# Chapter 6: Working with vulnerable communities

## Freelance journalist and author Saba Salman on how the media is reporting extra pressures on the public

Award-winning journalist and author Saba Salman is a regular contributor to The Guardian, The Independent and the Byline Times and is also editor of quarterly magazine Community Living.

A topic of particular import for Saba – chair of the charity Sibs and author of *Made Possible: Stories of Success by People With Learning Disabilities* – is the experiences of those facing multiple barriers or disadvantage, particularly due to race or disability.

‘For disabled people and their families, the latest financial pressures comes on top of being hardest hit during Covid, and before that, austerity and welfare reform. I’ve spent the last year reporting on how things aren’t ‘back to normal’ after Covid for people

with disabilities. If you’re disabled, you already pay extra living costs – Scope’s research puts this at £583 extra a month. For people and families to face soaring living costs on top of what they already have to deal with is adding insult onto injury, to say the least.

‘People’s stories matter and personal insights have more value than a spokespersons’ words, no matter how well-meant the words or important the cause. The charities I tend to work with the most are the ones giving a real platform to and taking their lead from people with direct experience. And that’s not the same as attaching a case study to an email or a ‘beneficiary’ soundbite at the end of a press release.

‘Going forward, we need a focus on areas that always get overlooked; social care and disability issues, especially learning disability. Social care got on the radar during the pandemic – eventually – but it’s now back to where it’s always been, as the poor

relation of healthcare and ignored by successive Governments. As for learning disability, it is over 20 years since the Government produced its national strategy for learning disability support.

‘If more politicians realised that people with a learning disability have the right to vote and can contribute to their communities, they’d realise they need to appeal to this part of the electorate.’

**More information about Saba Salman and her work can be found at her website: [sabalman.com](https://sabalman.com).**

**Find out more about Sibs work supporting the siblings of disabled children and adults here: [sibs.org.uk](https://sibs.org.uk).**



# Chapter 7: 6 tips for planning your communications

## 1) Give journalists what they need for their story

'The contacts I prefer working with are the ones who let me know what's coming up, rather than just add me to a general media list for press releases. Maybe a charity is planning a campaign, report or research study, and it might fit with what I'm working on.'

'If I can't report it right away, it might help shape a future piece. Advance notice is always good because I don't usually work on fast turnaround news pieces.' – Saba Salman, freelance journalist and author.

## 2) Share specifics – reporting has had to speed up significantly

'For the TFN website, we won't need to spend ages pointlessly rewriting an already well-written press release; we want to publish with the minimum of fuss and move on to the next one.'

'Have a strong line, marshal the facts and figures, include quotes and pictures (even a stock picture is helpful). Case studies are always welcome.' – Graham Martin, editor of Third Force News.

## 3) Make contacts: the media wants to tell your story

'Nothing new here – develop contacts. Journalists are over-worked and under resourced and there are not enough of them these days thanks to cuts which have devastated newsrooms. They are waiting to be spoon-fed, so do it.'

'Putting it very simplistically; get your story told effectively and you get the ear of the public and politicians.' – Graham Martin.

## 4) Find those who have the power to make change in your sector

'There are a lot of MPs, so you need to find the two or three who will become your advocates and advisers. Really research their interests and what they can do to help. Make it easy for them with clear messaging and calls to action. Follow and comment on what they do on social media and give them good content to post.' – Katie Tait, director of PR and public affairs for Maggie's cancer charity.

## 5) Ensure the tone of your comms is appropriate for the message and for the times

'We did a lot of work during our campaign planning to make sure we got our tone-of-voice right. This is something we're really conscious of – we always strive to make sure the way we're talking about issues is the way people impacted are talking about them, too.'

'We held workshops with our storytellers and ambassadors as well as our front-line staff to find out what people are saying when they come to us for help and also what they really wouldn't want to hear/read. We took out any jargon or anything that didn't sound completely natural and then issued a tone-of-voice document across the organisation to make sure everyone was on the same page.' – Katie Tait.

## 6) Remember who is at the centre of your campaign

'Ensure that those your campaign is intended for remain front and centre. Building strong foundations is incredibly key – from there you can diversify the angles you push, move onto national press and then become a part of the conversation on TV and media outlets.'

'Lots of leg-work, a strong message and consistency are the most important ingredients for success.' – Rosie MacDonald, senior PR strategist at Love Energy Savings.



