

June 2026

Dignity Without Dilution: A Blueprint for Ethical Creative in Fundraising

BLUE  STATE

Contents

1. Ethical creative, in a sector under strain
2. Lessons & reflections
3. Findings from the study
4. Ethical creative in practice
5. How we can help

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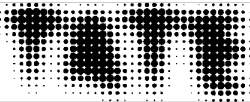
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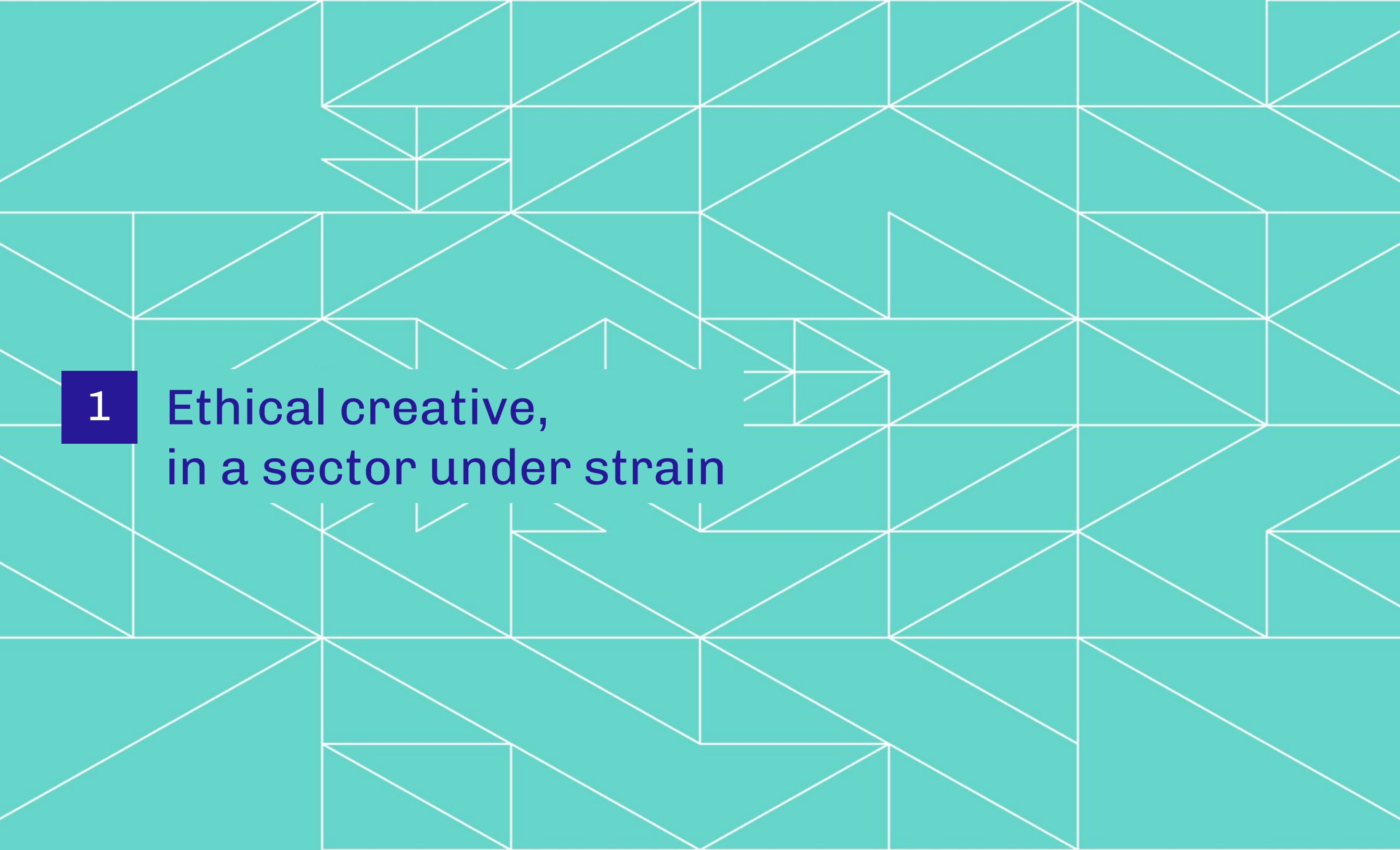


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We're a full-service, purpose-driven agency with cross-sector experience.

 Save the Children®			 Catholic Agency for Overseas Development
			
			
			 The UN Refugee Agency



1

Ethical creative,
in a sector under strain

Ethical creative, in a sector under strain

In 2026, charities and NGOs are navigating overlapping pressures unlike anything we've seen before.

The pressures

- **Giving is getting harder.** Cost-of-living is still biting, donor numbers are shrinking, and acquisition costs are climbing.
- **Emergencies keep stacking.** Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, the Middle East, and climate shocks—fundraisers are competing for the same finite donor attention, against a backdrop of declining news coverage, leading to desensitisation.
- **Trust is fragile.** Donors and regulators are scrutinising how charities show up, demanding transparency, authenticity, and consent.
- **AI is reshaping what "real" means.** Synthetic imagery is forcing a fresh reckoning for authenticity in creative.

The shifts we're seeing

- An active, ongoing reckoning to decolonise fundraising and retire extractive imagery
- Rising expectations around dignity, consent, and locally-led storytelling are making content volume challenging
- A more values-led donor base that spots saviour tropes faster than ever
- Emergency and visible-need appeals still drive the strongest response—but audiences are splitting sharply on whether that imagery feels authentic or exploitative
- Trust in INGOs is critically low: only 9% of UK adults said they trusted international charities completely in 2026 ([see our UK Giving Behaviours Tracker for 2026](#)).

Together, these forces are reshaping what effective, ethical creative looks like, and they're surfacing a tension the sector is grappling with daily. That's what this report explores.

To provide more insights to the sector, we've tested creative storytelling with UK audiences since 2022

Each year, we survey over 2,000 adults in the UK to understand how they give and why. In three of our research waves, we've included four types of imagery commonly used in child-focused fundraising. Participants rated each image on how realistic and respectful it felt, and indicated which images made them most or least likely to donate.

The four image types we tested were:

- **Stereotypical portrayal:** highly charged depictions of distress
- **White saviour:** global north volunteers depicted helping children
- **Impact/local teams:** local community members or local staff leading the work
- **Neutral/positive:** children shown in everyday or hopeful contexts

Stereotypical portrayal:



White saviour:



Impact/local teams:



Neutral/positive:



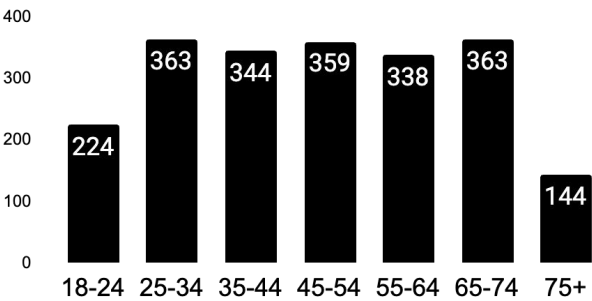
Sample composition for our 2026 study

The below shows pre-weighted sample, i.e. the number of individual respondents for each demographic group.

Sample size

2,136
survey responses

Age



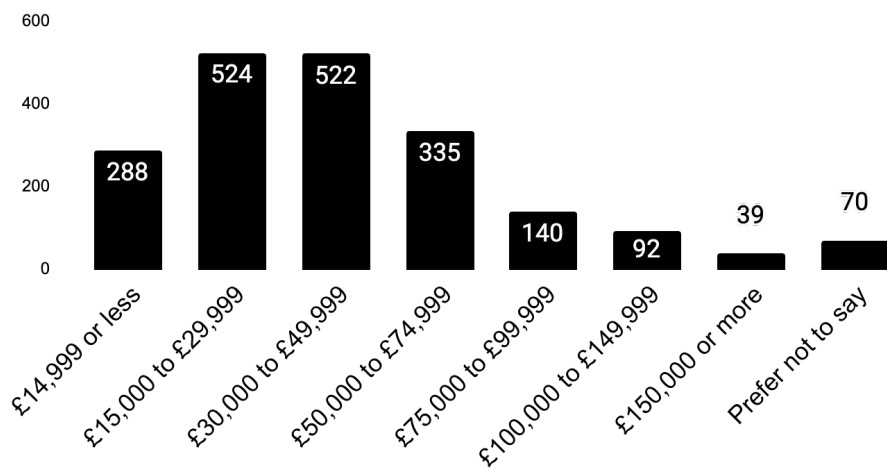
Region

Region	Respon.
London	198
East of England	154
Yorkshire and the Humber	239
East Midlands	90
North West	239
West Midlands	81
South East	183
Wales	292
North East	186
South West	107
Scotland	188
Northern Ireland	179

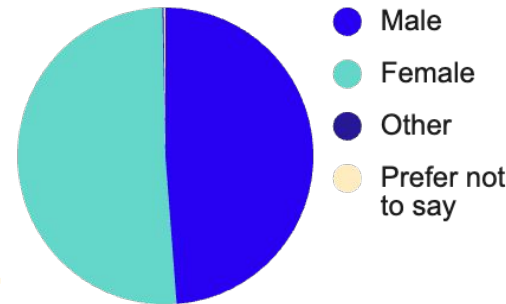
Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Respon.
White - British	1873
Asian/Asian British	72
Black/Black British	64
Mixed/Multiple	24
Other	103

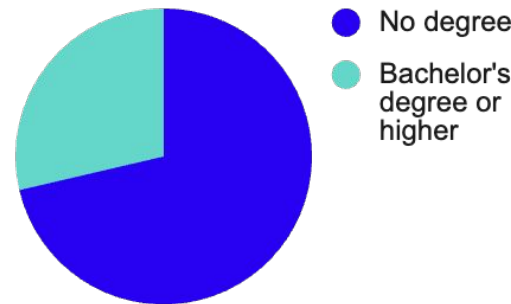
Household income (pre-tax)



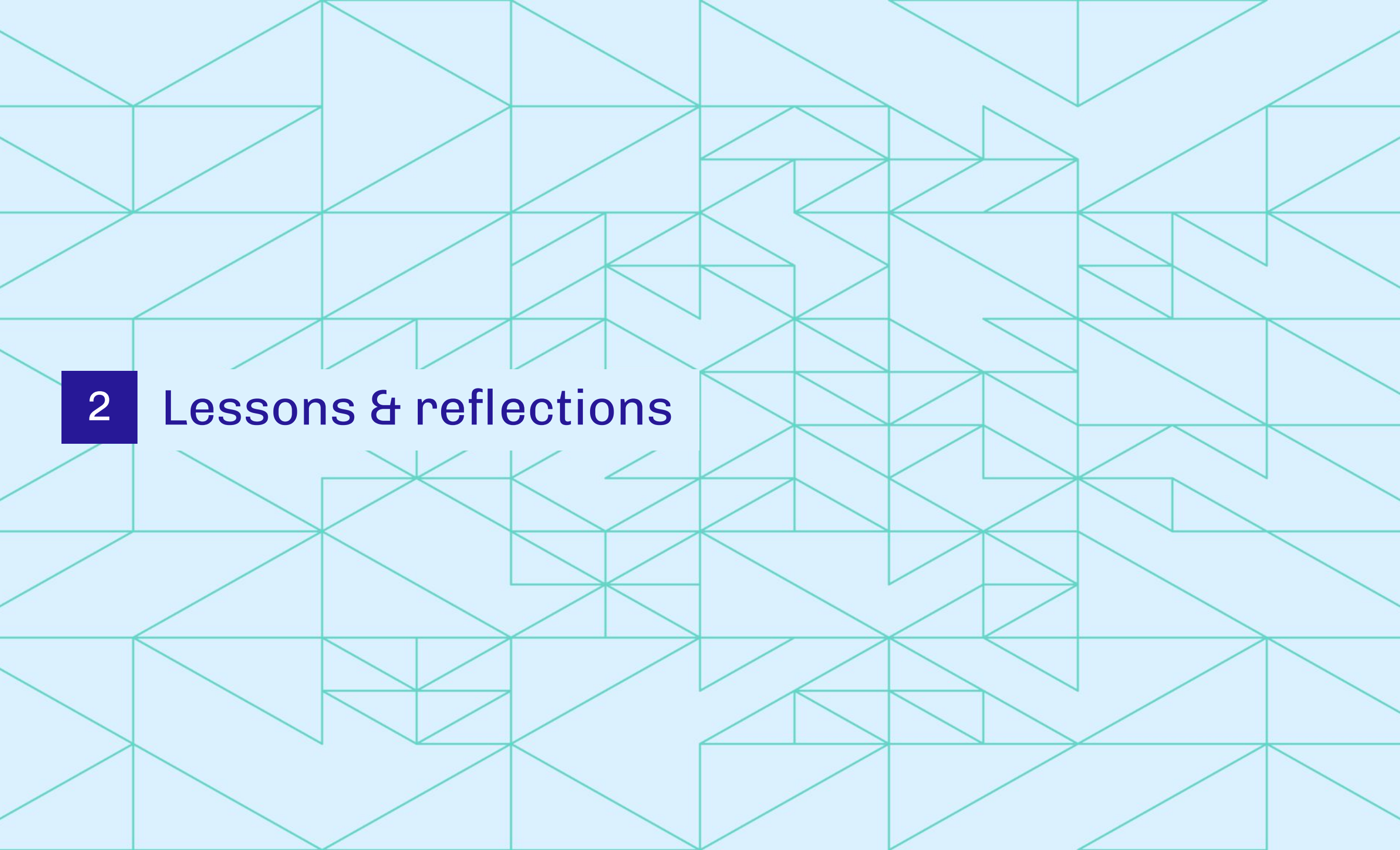
Gender



Degree



*Conducted 30 January-2 February 2026.



2 Lessons & reflections

Our five key recommendations

Three years of research, 6,000+ adults in the UK participated in our study, and one clear conclusion: there is no magic formula for ethical creative. But **there is a better way forward.**

The following insights draw from our research and client work and tell us what audiences respond to, and how to achieve both ethical representation **and** fundraising effectiveness.

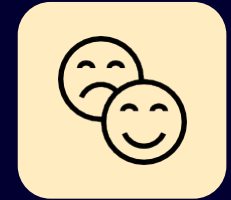
They are not a checklist. They are a starting point for more intentional, more honest, and ultimately more effective creative.



Centre local teams and impact to drive meaningful engagement and action



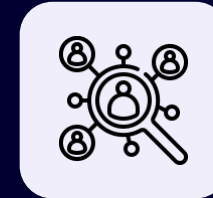
Treat ethical storytelling as a practice, not a formula: test, test, test



Ethical creative isn't about removing emotion, it's about reshaping it



Think about where in the audience journey you use different types of imagery



Accept that no single creative approach works for everyone—and plan for it

Centre local teams and impact to drive meaningful engagement and action

The data is clear: **imagery showing local teams, community leadership, and tangible outcomes performs best** across nearly every measure. It is seen as dignified and realistic, drives donations at the second-highest rate (26%), and deters fewer people (22%).

Audiences respond to seeing that their donation makes **a visible difference delivered by people who are part of the communities they serve**. Move away from the outside-in gaze and towards imagery that shows the work being done by, and for, the people closest to it.



Treat ethical storytelling as a practice, not a formula: test, test, test

There is no single formula that will resolve ethical storytelling tensions overnight. What is within our control is a commitment to ongoing, intentional testing: **listening to communities, learning from audiences, and adapting as contexts change**. Our research and client work show audience perceptions have shifted: stereotypical portrayals are being recognised as problematic at a growing rate, and organisations that stay ahead of this do so by testing, not just instinct.

Build regular creative testing into your fundraising cycle.

By regularly experimenting with content and reflecting on what drives both positive responses from audiences and, crucially, donations, the sector can move forward with confidence. Ethical storytelling is not a fixed destination but a practice we can continually improve together.



Ethical creative isn't about removing emotion, it's about channelling it for good

One of the most persistent myths in the sector is that ethical storytelling means softening the message or only showing positive outcomes. Our findings and work challenge this. Audiences aren't turned off by emotion—they're turned off by perceived manipulation. Fundraising appeals often dip in response when they **lack emotion**.

The same image that triggers sadness or empathy in one person may trigger distrust in another, not because of what it shows, but because of how it frames the subject. The opportunity is to find ways to evoke genuine empathy through honesty: showing real context, real agency, and real humanity. Audiences, and especially mid-value donors, are increasingly sophisticated; they can tell the difference, and they reward organisations that respect their values.



Think about where in the audience journey you use different types of imagery and stories

Not all imagery needs to do the same job at the same moment. The research suggests that positive and aspirational imagery that shows progress, well-being, and impact does resonate with audiences who are more connected to a cause. Therefore, this approach towards imagery may be better suited to retention strategies & onward journeys.

For acquisition and emergency appeals, where fundraisers have to communicate need and prompt immediate action, a different emotional register may be needed. The key is intentionality: **map your creative choices to the audience's state of mind and their position in the relationship with your organisation**, rather than applying a single visual approach across all touchpoints.

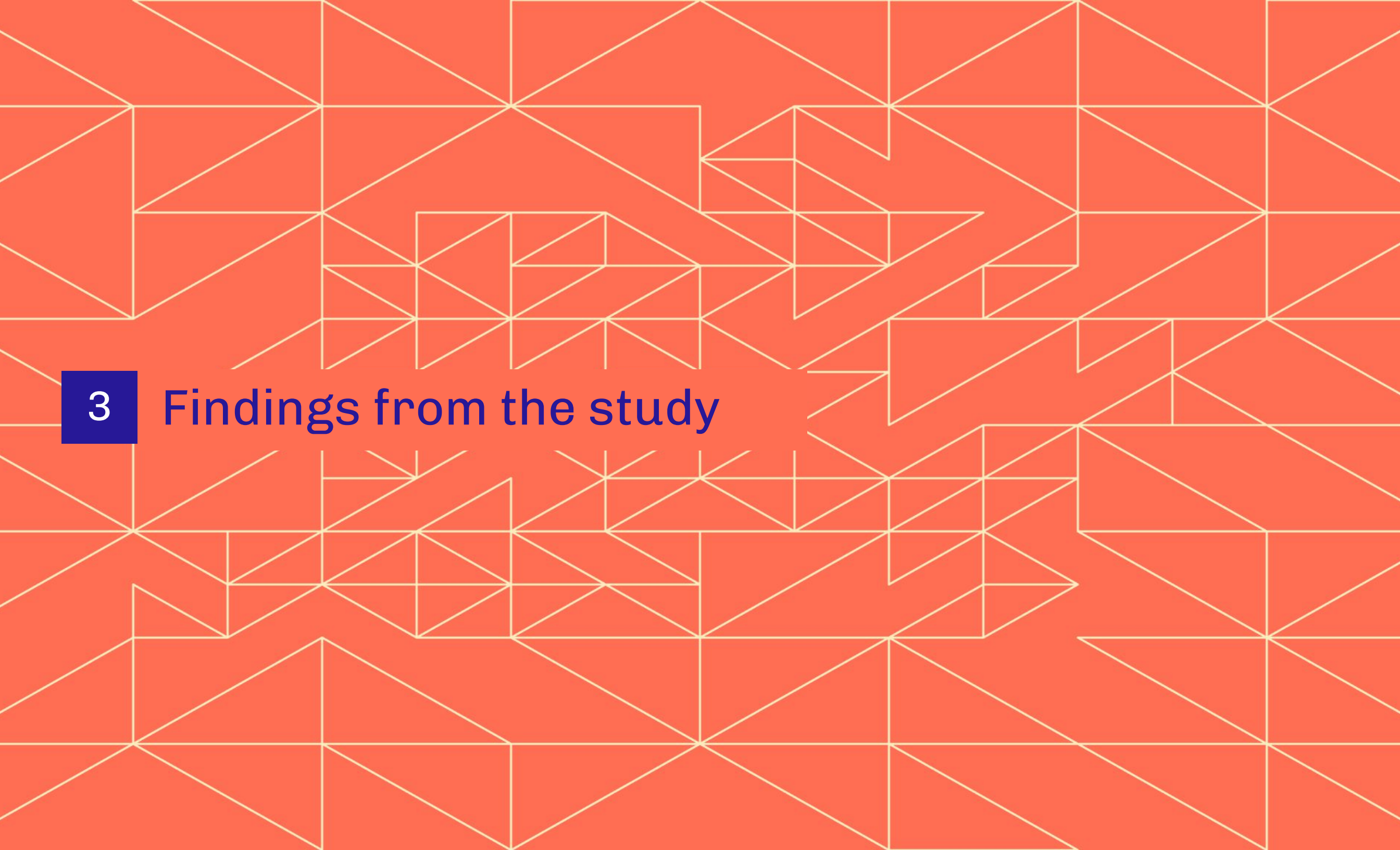


Accept that no single creative approach works for everyone—and plan for it

Perhaps the most honest and obvious finding in this research is that audiences are not all the same. The image that moves one person to donate is the exact reason another person refuses to give. This **polarisation isn't a problem to be solved, but a reality to be planned for.**

Rather than searching for a universally acceptable approach, invest in understanding the distinct values and motivations of different segments within your supporter base. Diversify your creative, test different approaches with different audiences, and **resist the temptation to optimise for one group at the expense of others.**





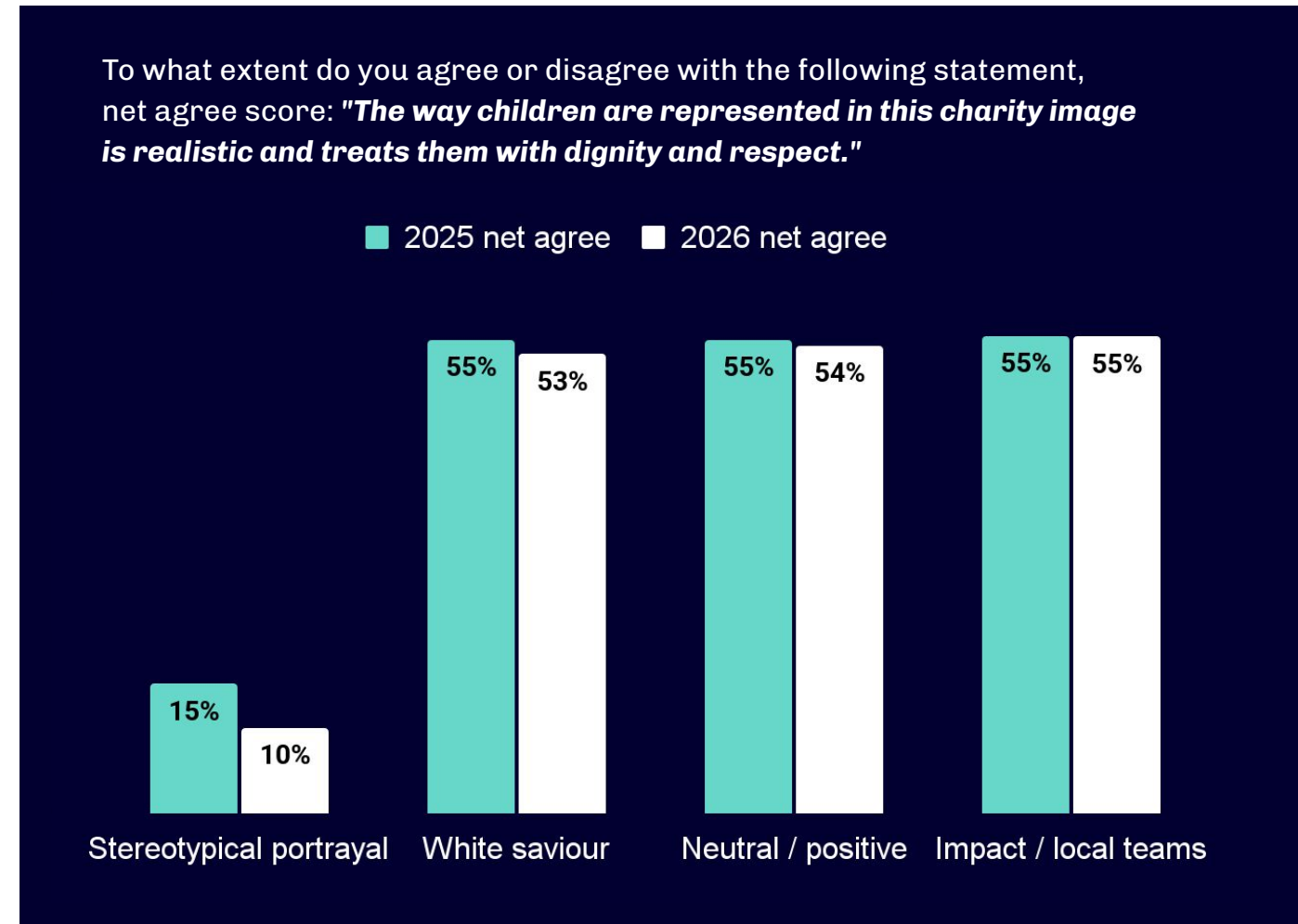
3 Findings from the study

Audiences know that stereotypical portrayals don't treat children with dignity and respect

The images that were found to treat people with the least respect and dignity were the 'stereotypical portrayals'. These received a net agreement score of just 10% for the statement: *"The way children are represented in this charity image is realistic and treats them with dignity and respect."* This represents a decline from 15% the previous year, reinforcing a clear pattern in audience perception; people increasingly recognise these images as problematic and do not view them as ethical representations.

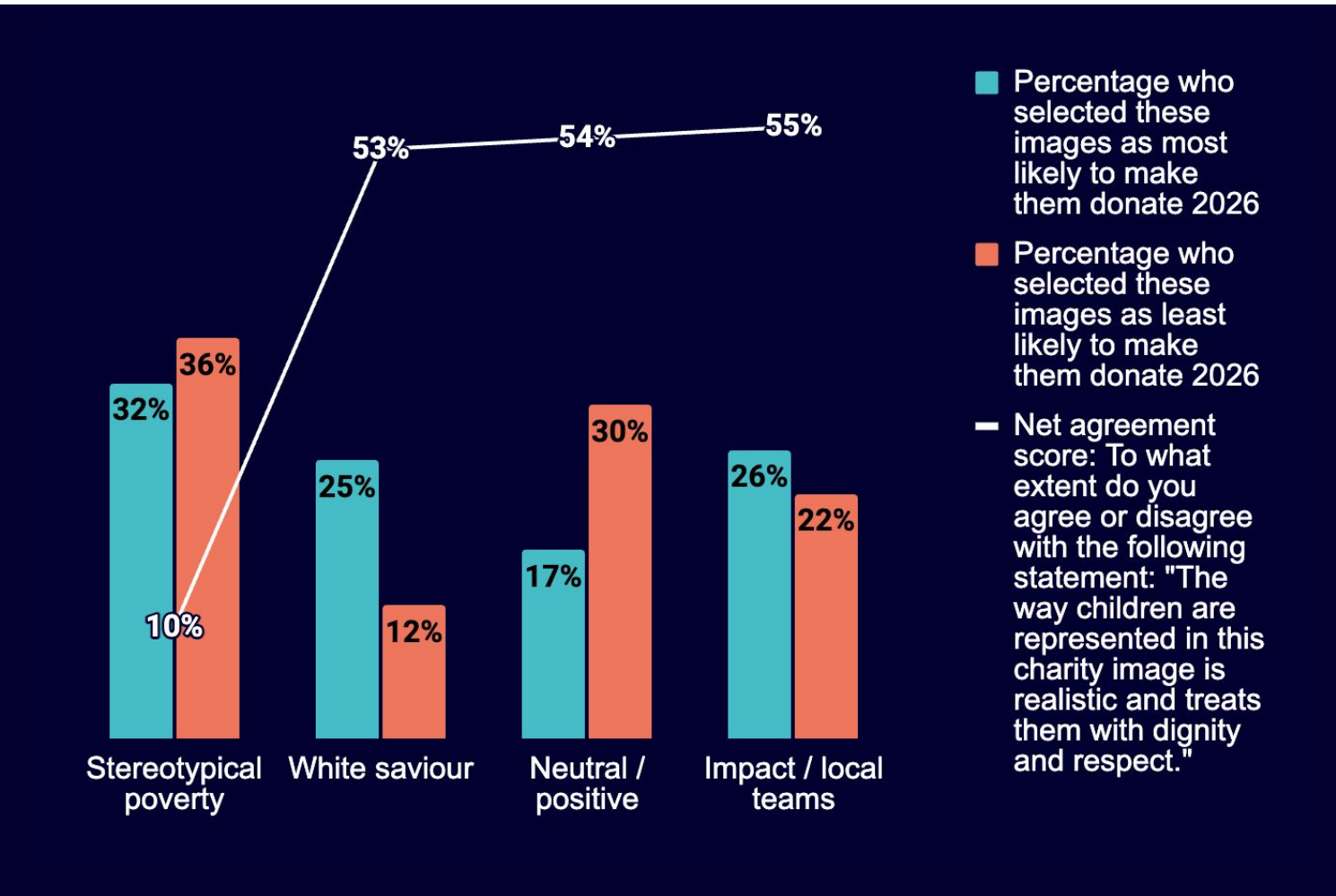
In contrast, images categorised as 'white saviour' (53%), 'neutral/positive' (54%), and 'impact/local teams' (55%) all received substantially higher net agreement scores on the same statement—a significant difference in perception that has held firm.

This indicates that image choice does actually shape opinion on whether a charity is representing people ethically. While 'stereotypical portrayals' continue to be widely recognised as undignified, images that show wider context and agency are more likely to be seen as respectful and credible. The question that follows is: **if audiences can distinguish between ethical and unethical imagery, does this perception influence which images are most likely to motivate donations?**



UK Nat Rep: Jan 2025, N: 2,010 | Jan 2026, N: 2,136

Stereotypical images are the most polarising, whereas ‘impact/ local teams’ performs strongly, offering a credible way through



‘Stereotypical’ imagery showing visible signs of poverty or malnutrition remains the most likely to drive donation intent (32%), but the efficacy case is weakening. These images are the most polarising of all: more respondents now say this imagery would make them least likely to donate (36%) than most likely. This has been consistent across the 2022 and 2025 waves.

By contrast, ‘neutral/positive’ portrayals—the ones that most fundraisers have shifted to in an attempt to “be more ethical”—are **the least effective at driving donation intent**. Only 17% said these images made them most likely to give, and nearly a third (30%) selected them as least likely to prompt a donation. By stripping the emotion from visual storytelling, fundraisers also dampen the propensity to respond.

The most promising finding is around imagery showing impact and local teams which performs strongly across all measures. Images in this category are seen as dignified, realistic, and effective, and it is the second-highest driver of donations (26%) while also deterring the fewest (22%). **This suggests promising signs for a locally driven approach that centres agency, leadership, and real-world impact, offering a path to balancing ethical representation with fundraising effectiveness.**

Often the reasons that draw audiences to ‘stereotypical portrayals’ are the same reasons that turn others away

‘Stereotypical portrayals’ of children provoke sharply polarised reactions. Around a third of respondents said these images were most likely to drive donations (32%), while slightly more (36%) said they were least likely to motivate giving.

This polarisation reflects that some audiences are drawn to images for their emotional impact, sense of urgency, and perceived authenticity, while others, of the very same images, see guilt-driven framing, a lack of dignity, and reductive stereotypes.

Essentially, audiences aren't turned off by emotion—they're turned off by manipulation.

*Why people said they were **most** likely to donate to ‘stereotypical portrayal’*

Emotional activation: Images showing visible distress (sadness, hunger, crying, desperation) trigger empathy, heartbreak, and guilt that motivate action.

Sense of urgent need: Visible suffering signals children are in immediate danger or hardship, making action feel urgent.

Perceived authenticity of suffering: Some felt these images appeared more “real” rather than staged, increasing their trust and willingness to donate.

*Why people said they were **least** likely to donate to ‘stereotypical portrayal’*

Emotional manipulation & guilt framing: Images perceived as deliberately trying to provoke guilt or pressure donations feel manipulative and reduce willingness to act.

Lack of dignity and exploitation: Emphasising desperate need can make images feel exploitative, undermining trust and compassion.

Discomfort with negative stereotypes: Images portraying children as helpless and defined by poverty feel stereotypical, reductive, and off-putting.

‘Stereotypical portrayals’ split the audience

Reasons **for** donating to
‘stereotypical portrayal’

“ *Because it's so depressing to see a child with so much sadness in her face the world should not be like this.*

55-64, Female, Yorkshire and the Humber

“ *Because in these photos the children look like they need the most help and support from charitable causes.*

18-24, Male, North West

Reasons **against** donating
to ‘stereotypical portrayal’

“ *Because it makes me feel like campaigners for the charity are not providing respect for the children by taking photos when they are at their most mentally vulnerable.*

25-34, Female, West Midlands

“ *It feels like it's taken to make someone feel guilty so they donate.*

35-44, Female, East Midlands

**See the images we tested on page 7.*

***See more quotes in the appendix.*

‘Neutral/positive’ images appeal to optimistic and hopeful audiences, yet lack of visible need & clarity limits broader appeal

While ‘neutral/positive’ images were the least likely to motivate donations (17%), those who did respond to them were drawn to the hope, optimism, and aspirational vision of the future they represent.

However, almost twice as many respondents (30%) said these images were the ones they were least likely to donate to. This was largely due to a perceived lack of need and lack of context, which often resulted in a weaker emotional response.

This finding matches our in-market fundraising work—without visible need or context, appeals can struggle to create urgency or clearly communicate why support is required.

Why people said they were **most** likely to donate to ‘neutral/positive’ images

Hope and positivity as a motivator: Rather than sadness or guilt, these images evoke warmth, happiness, and optimism. This creates a feel-good response that encourages some people to give.

Aspirational future: These images represent the future some donors want to help create. They show possibility, progress, and empowerment rather than crisis.

Visible impact of donations: To some people, the imagery signals that donations make a positive difference.

Why people said they were **least** likely to donate to ‘neutral/positive’ images

Perceived lack of need: When children appear happy or healthy, some audiences assume support is no longer necessary, reducing urgency to give.

Motivation driven by suffering: Some donors explicitly say they are more compelled to give when hardship and struggle are visible.

Lack of emotional clarity or context: Without clear signals of need or impact, positive images can feel vague and fail to create a strong emotional response.

‘Neutral/positive’ imagery struggles to land impact

Reasons **for** donating to
‘neutral/positive’ images

“ I like the brightness and the hope those images bring. It shows what my donation can do for people.

18-24, Female, Yorkshire and the Humber

“ They all give you good thoughts and feel that money before has done something.

25-34, Male, East of England

Reasons **against** donating
to ‘neutral/positive’ images

“ It does not really make me think of people in need it could just as easily be a family photo.

65-74, Male, Wales

“ I personally would be less likely to donate if they were shown as happy. It’s showing the pain and suffering that persuades me to donate.

18-24, Female, North West

*See the images we tested on page 7.

**See more quotes in the appendix.

‘Impact/local teams’ images balance dignity, realism, and effectiveness, motivating donors while minimising deterrence

Imagery that showcases impact and local teams performed well across all measures. These images are seen as treating people with dignity and respect, as well as one in four (26%) saying they were most likely to donate to these images, driven by the combination of tangible impact and realistic, respectful portrayal of subjects

At the same time, these images were less likely to deter donations, with only one in five (22%) saying they were least likely to give, often due to a perceived lack of need or lower emotional pull.

Why people said they were **most** likely to donate to ‘impact/local teams’ images

Tangible results and effectiveness: Images showing practical outcomes (e.g., medical care, education, health initiatives) make donations feel meaningful and demonstrate the organisation’s impact.

Realism and trustworthiness: Audiences respond positively to imagery that feels unstaged and authentic, building confidence that donations reach those in need.

Dignity and empowerment: Portraying children and communities with respect, highlighting local agency, and avoiding saviour narratives strengthens motivations to act.

Why people said they were **least** likely to donate to ‘impact/local teams’ images

Perceived lack of need / low urgency: Children appearing well cared for can signal that support is already sufficient, reducing the sense of urgency to give.

Low emotional impact: Images of stability, happiness, or adequate care often fail to generate strong empathy or concern.

‘Impact/local teams’ reactions from the study

Reasons **for** donating to
'impact/local teams'
images

“ Because it clearly showed the impact of donations and created an emotional connection that made the cause feel important and urgent.

25-34, Male, Yorkshire and the Humber

“ They are dignifying and they are not just "white saviours". They're local doctors being supported by the charities which is better for sustainability and long term effect.

18-24, Female, South West

Reasons **against** donating to
'impact/local teams'
images

“ The image seems to show no one in extreme need any more than anyone in a developed country. In fact they look like they have a better life than most.

45-54, Male, London

“ Because the child is being given an injection, this clearly indicates the children and community are being supported medically.

18-24, Female, North West

*See the images we tested on page 7.

**See more quotes in the appendix.

Finally, 'white saviour' imagery builds connection for some, but reinforces unequal power dynamics for others

While 'white saviour' imagery was the least likely to deter audiences (12%), and was no more effective at driving donations than 'impact/local teams' imagery (25% vs. 26%).

For some audiences, 'white saviour' imagery demonstrates impact and creates a sense of connection by showing people helping in ways they can personally relate to; yet this can be problematic as it reinforces saviour stereotypes.

For others, these images directly highlight unequal power dynamics and outdated narratives, undermining trust and credibility.

*Why people said they were **most** likely to donate to white saviour images*

Tangible results and effectiveness: Much like 'impact/local teams' images, showing aid in action makes the impact of donations visible, helping people feel their contribution will make a real difference.

Connection and relatability: Seeing charity workers directly engaging with children helps some audiences imagine themselves in their place, creating a personal connection to the cause.

*Why people said they were **least** likely to donate to white saviour images*

Perceived lack of need / low urgency: As with 'impact/local teams' images, seeing visible support can signal that needs are already being met, reducing urgency to give.

Awareness of negative stereotypes and power imbalances: Discomfort with imagery that reinforces 'white saviour' narratives, viewing it as outdated, condescending and rooted in unequal power dynamics.

‘White saviour’ imagery divides the audience

Reasons **for** donating to
‘white saviour’ images

“ *Because it illustrates a charity's work in action and shows a positive outcome of donated funds.*

45-54, Male, North West

“ *I chose it because the supporter brought himself to the level of the child so that he can understand him better.*

25-34, Female, West Midlands

Reasons **against** donating
to ‘white saviour’ images

“ *I’m uncomfortable with the image of white adults handing things out to black children. It promotes negative stereotypes.*

45-54, Female, South East

“ *A lot of charities seemingly have this weird way of professing that the white ppl are the saviours and educators of the ... world which ticks me off a bit.*

18-24, Male, Yorkshire and the Humber

**See the images we tested on page 7.*

***See more quotes in the appendix.*

We also explored AI, finding that most donors say they would not give to a charity using AI-generated images

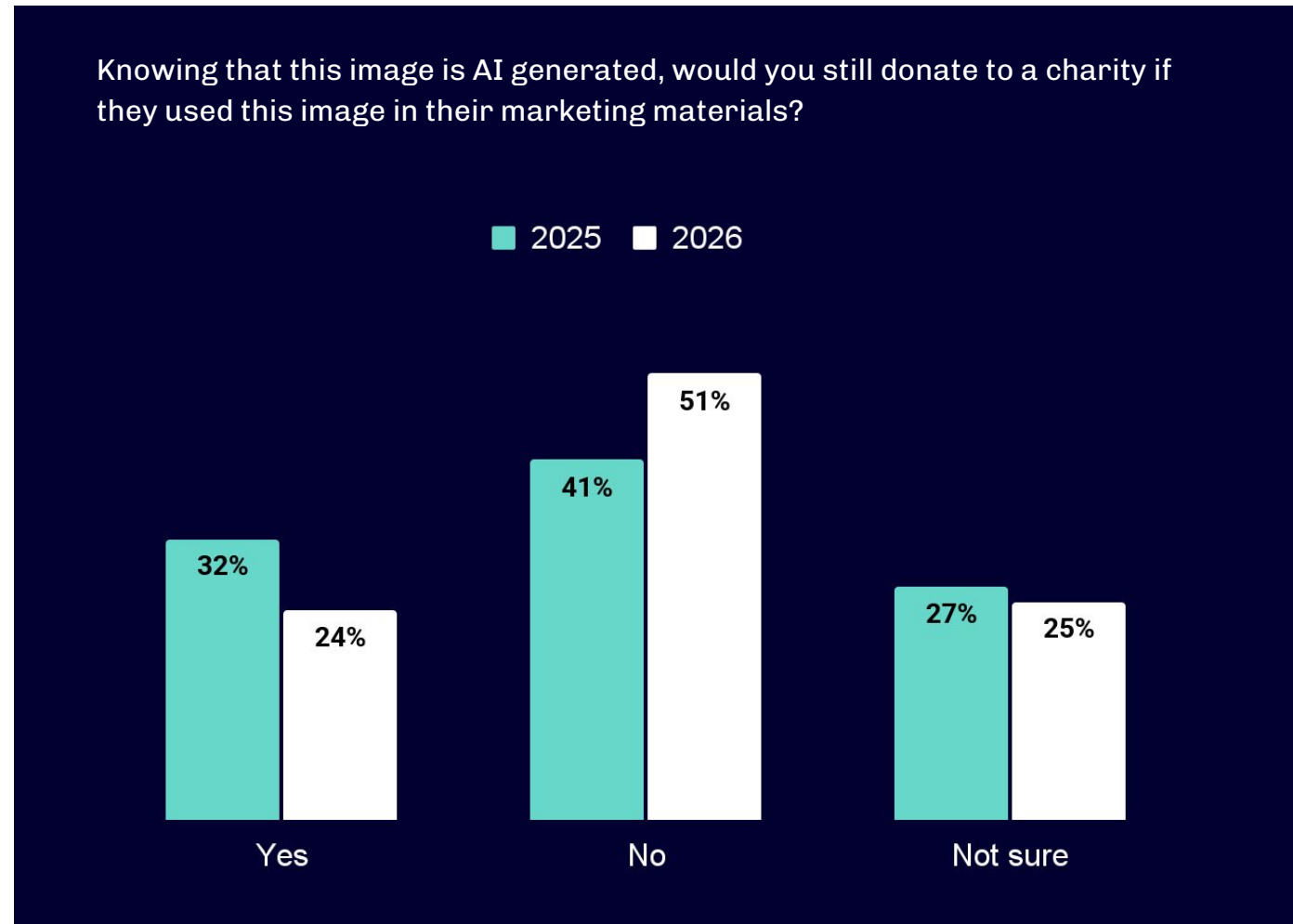
We showed respondents [a selection of AI-generated fundraising images](#), then asked whether they would donate to a charity using them if they knew they were AI-generated.

We found that over the past year, attitudes have hardened. In 2026, 51% said they would not donate to a charity using AI-generated images in their marketing, up from 41% in 2025. Meanwhile, those who said they would still donate fell from 32% to 24%.

The proportion who are unsure has remained relatively stable (27% vs 25%), suggesting the shift is not uncertainty but that more people are making up their minds, and landing on no.

This points to something deeper than a reaction to a new technology: donors want to trust that the stories charities tell are real. Transparency and authenticity remain central to effective fundraising storytelling and they are increasingly likely to turn away when they sense they are not.

This is an interesting trend to monitor long term, as more charities use AI in their appeals, and the public may get accustomed and desensitised to seeing these images in fundraising appeals. All usage should contain a notice to the donor for AI-generated and enhanced imagery to build trust and transparency.



UK Nat Rep: Jan 2025, N: 2,010 | Jan 2026, N: 2,136



4

Ethical creative in practice

Centre local teams and impact to drive meaningful engagement and action



Imagery showing local teams, community leadership, and tangible outcomes performs best



Audiences respond to seeing that their donation makes a visible difference delivered by people who are part of the communities they serve

Ethical creative in practice

Our creative work with Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) USA was centered on the incredible programme staff on the ground, bringing their stories and experiences to life. Read about some of our wider work with MSF [here](#).

143%

Increase in email revenue from Q1 2023

2.8x

the expected spike in Q1, outside of usual giving season



MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES
DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS

Hear how doctors are saving lives amid crisis



saving lives amid crisis

WATCH NOW

Dear FIRSTNAME(Fallback: friend),

Right now, Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) doctors are saving lives amid crisis. From medicine shortages and difficult terrain, to threats against their work and safety, MSF doctors often face enormous challenges as they work tirelessly to make a difference.

Watch now and hear directly from our doctors about the powerful, personal reasons they work with MSF to save lives—and see the power of your impact.

LEARN MORE



MEDECINS SANS FRONTIERES
DOCTORS WITHOUT BORDERS



DOCTORS DAY

Hear from Doctors Without Borders/MSF staff as they bring care to people who need it most

WATCH NOW



ABYEI

“I’m happy when treating a patient. It gives me joy knowing that I have saved a life.”

MARY AJOK
COMMUNITY VOLUNTEER

GAZA

“Since the war started until now, I have been working nonstop, 24 hours, all the days... This is really a heartbreaking situation.”

DR. HAIFER ABUKHUSSA





Global MSF teams identified and trained content creators on the ground to ensure teams had the resources and knowledge of what would make good and ethical content.



Treat ethical storytelling as a practice, not a formula: test, test, test



*Listen to
communities, learn
from audiences, and
adapt as contexts
change.*



*By regularly experimenting with
content and reflecting on what
drives both agency and action, the
sector can move forward with
confidence.*

Testing shows that ethical storytelling is not about replacing urgency with hope, but about framing emotion in ways that audiences trust and connect with.

Hopeful

A

WINNER



All of us can
make an impact

Doctors Without Borders: Your compassion fuels hope and healing around the world. You ensure that our teams have the tools, resources and support needed to provide lifesaving medical care. We wanted to share a few ways you can amplify your impact with us this year. <https://bit.ly/3VkJQnM>

Bold

B



Together,
we are stronger

Doctors Without Borders: We support refugees. We provide safe abortion care. We are among the first on the scene when an emergency strikes. We provide medical care for the people who need it most—regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or politics. We are independent, impartial, and neutral. Learn how you can get more involved with our work: <https://bit.ly/49ROHBC>

Ethical creative isn't about removing emotion, it's about finding a way to move donors with dignity



*Audiences aren't
turned off by
emotion—they're
turned off by
manipulation.*



*Find ways to evoke genuine
empathy through honesty: showing
real context, real agency, and true
shared humanity*



We first started working with UK for UNHCR in 2019, which kicked off 6+ years of empathy-first winter appeals. The campaign above tapped into the frustration of the pandemic to create empathy for how refugees may feel all year round. Throughout our partnership, we continued evolving empathy-led appeals, reducing the distance between donors and individuals forced to flee their homes. See the full case study [here](#).

200%

increase in income
from regular donors

4.1

ROAS across paid
media

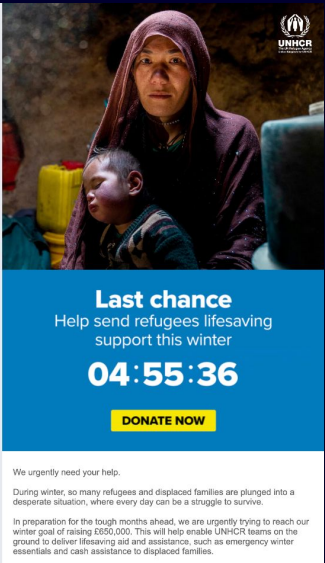
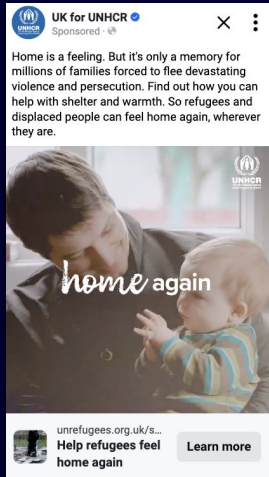
Think about where in the audience journey you use different types of imagery and stories



Not all imagery needs to do the same job at the same moment.



Map creative choices to the audience's state of mind and their position in the relationship with your organisation.



Most recently, building on 6+ years of learning for UK for UNHCR, we co-created the above campaign with staff and refugees. Challenging donors to define what “home” means for them and where they feel most at home. Read about another UK for UNHCR campaign leading with empathy [here](#).

£700K

raised at a positive ROAS

6,400+

new donations generated

Accept that no single creative approach works for everyone—and plan for it



Polarisation isn't a problem to be solved, but a reality to be planned for.



Invest in understanding the distinct values and motivations of different segments within your supporter base.



For UNFPA, the UN Population Fund, we developed a campaign for mothers, using imagery that reflected women's real experiences of giving birth in conflict zones. The campaign, leveraging limited assets from programme teams, outperformed all previous appeals. See the full case study [here](#).

3.5
ROAS across paid
media

3X
increase in income
from regular donors



5

How we can help

If you'd like support in navigating this journey, we're here to help



The Ethical Incubator: from insight to impact

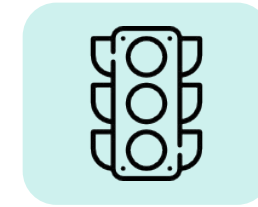
Don't guess—test. We provide structured, live-market testing plans to validate ethical fundraising best practices.

We help fundraisers build, launch, and analyse campaigns, giving you the hard data needed to scale with confidence and integrity.



Ethical creative content workshops:

Bring us your existing assets, and we'll collaborate with you on how to move forward. In these workshops, we "hack" your current creative—adapting messaging and visuals to increase conversion while ensuring every touchpoint aligns with your ethical standards.



Ethical pulse check

A one-off diagnostic service. Reviewing your last 3-5 campaigns, we can score them against key ethical trends moving forward (e.g., Transparency, Donor Empowerment, Language Dignity). We provide clients with a traffic light report around what's working well and where things could improve, combined with high-level recommendations of how to re-address the balance.

If you'd like support in navigating this journey, we're here to help



Creative campaign ideation and design

We provide end-to-end campaign development, translating research-led insights into functional fundraising assets. From initial strategy and art direction to final content production, we manage the entire creative process to ensure your messaging remains ethically sound while meeting performance targets.



Frontline storytelling labs

We help your programme teams move beyond stock imagery by establishing a structured framework for authentic content capture. These labs provide the training workflows necessary to gather high-trust, dignity-first stories from the frontline, ensuring a consistent stream of impact-driven content for your digital channels.



Audience research & message testing

We provide qualitative and quantitative testing to validate how your donors actually respond to ethical narratives. Through structured focus groups and message testing, we identify the specific language and imagery that drive conversion without compromising your values.

A closing note

We hope this research helps as many fundraisers as possible through a complex moment in the evolution of the sector.

As we have shown, there is no single formula for ethical creative. But **there is progress to be made**. For many fundraisers, it may take experimentation and course-correction to find the right balance between ethical, empowering storytelling and fundraising results.

What years of client experiments and 6,000+ donor voices surveyed have taught us is: many donors are not in the same place as charity communicators, and, in the quest to decolonise fundraising communications, some organisations have taken a uniform approach—removing all emotion and relying on neutral and positive imagery. Yet, these images often test the worst in both research environments and live appeals.

We are here to inspire you to think beyond the “safe”. **Towards the visual storytelling that moves donors, without relying on tropes and stereotypes.**

You are not alone on this journey. Keep testing. Keep listening to donors and keep engaging with communities with lived experience. Dignity and effectiveness were never a trade-off, and the organisations that prove it will be the ones donors trust most.

We hope the insights in this report encourage you to test more approaches showing visible work with frontline and programme teams.

As always, if you have questions, need help on this journey, or want to suggest topics for future reports, please get in touch.

For even more insights, you can find our [2026 UK Giving Behaviours Tracker here](#).

Best wishes,
Anjali, Jai, Jasmine, & Lizi

hellouk@bluestate.co

Thank you.

hellouk@bluestate.co



Appendix A - Methodology

Our methodology

Nationally representative polling data was weighted by the following demographics: age and social grade (using Market Research Definitions of ABC1 & C2DE) interlocked, gender, region, education (degree, yes or no), and ethnicity (White British, yes or no).

Our sample includes 2,136 complete individual responses in total.

Fieldwork was completed between 30 January and 2 February 2026.

Due to weighting and rounding, percentages may not add up to 100%.

The sample was collected via computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) using a number of different online panels, via a panel aggregator.

Blue State are proud to be a registered member of the [British Polling Council](#) (BPC).

Where size estimates for audiences in the UK are quoted, the following data sources are used:

- Total adult population: *Population estimates for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland: mid-2022* by the [ONS](#).
- Total adult non-White British ethnicity population:
 - *England and Wales from the 2021 Census (England & Wales).*
 - *Scotland from 2011 Census.*
 - *Northern Ireland from the Northern Ireland Statistics Research Agency.*

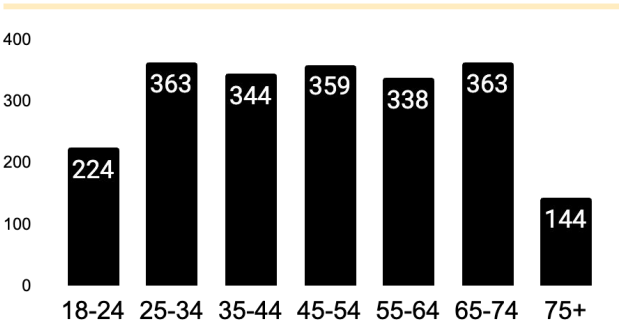
Sample composition for our 2026 study

The below shows pre-weighted sample, i.e. the number of individual respondents for each demographic group.

Sample size



Age



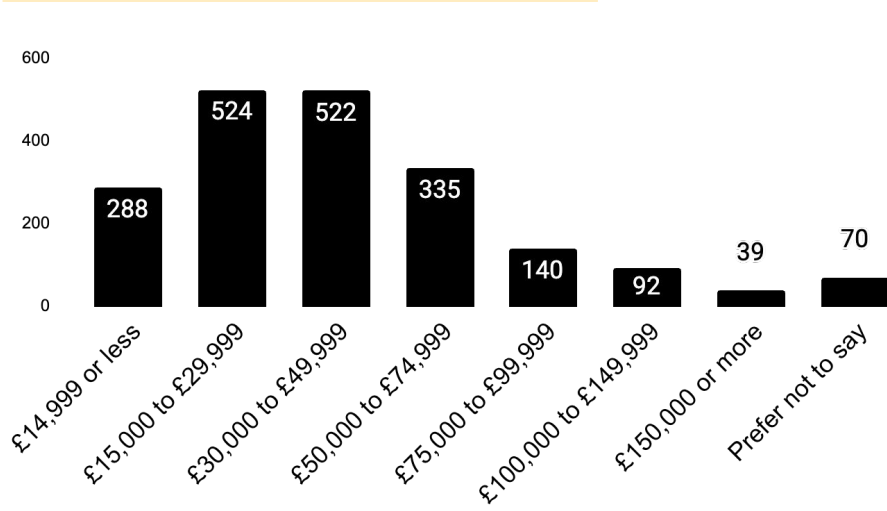
Region

Region	Respon.
London	198
East of England	154
Yorkshire and the Humber	239
East Midlands	90
North West	239
West Midlands	81
South East	183
Wales	292
North East	186
South West	107
Scotland	188
Northern Ireland	179

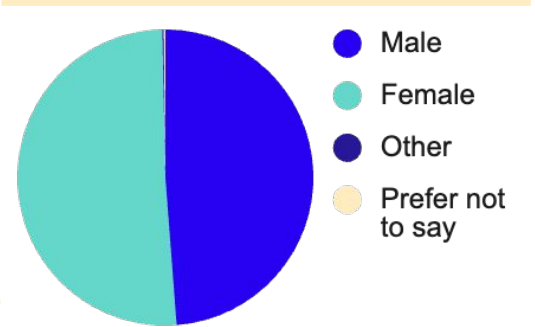
Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Respon.
White - British	1873
Asian/Asian British	72
Black/Black British	64
Mixed/Multiple	24
Other	103

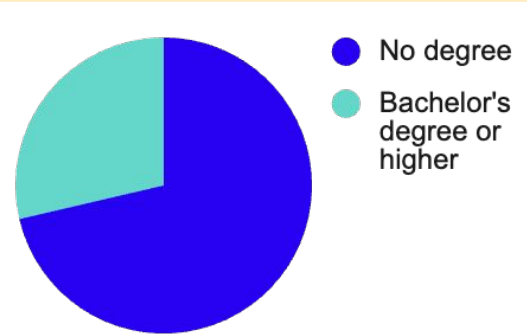
Household income (pre-tax)



Gender



Degree





Appendix B - Additional Qualitative Responses

To provide more insights to the sector, we've tested creative storytelling with UK audiences since 2022

Each year, we survey over 2,000 adults in the UK to understand how they give and why. In three of our research waves, we've included four types of imagery commonly used in child-focused fundraising. Participants rated each image on how realistic and respectful it felt, and indicated which images made them most or least likely to donate.

The four image types we tested were:

- **Stereotypical portrayal:** highly charged depictions of distress
- **White saviour:** global north volunteers depicted helping children
- **Impact/local teams:** local community members or local staff leading the work
- **Neutral/positive:** children shown in everyday or hopeful contexts

Stereotypical portrayal:



White saviour:



Impact/local teams:



Neutral/positive:



Often the reasons that draw audiences to stereotypical portrayals are the same reasons that turn others away

‘Stereotypical portrayals’ of children provoke sharply polarised reactions. Around a third of respondents said these images were most likely to drive donations (32%), while slightly more (36%) said they were least likely to motivate giving.

This polarisation reflects that some audiences are drawn to images for their emotional impact, sense of urgency, and perceived authenticity, while others, of the very same images, see guilt-driven framing, a lack of dignity, and reductive stereotypes.

Essentially, audiences aren't turned off by emotion—they're turned off by manipulation.

Why people said they were **most** likely to donate to ‘stereotypical portrayal’

Emotional activation: Images showing visible distress (sadness, hunger, crying, desperation) trigger empathy, heartbreak, and guilt that motivate action.

Sense of urgent need: Visible suffering signals children are in immediate danger or hardship, making action feel urgent.

Perceived authenticity of suffering: Some felt these images appeared more “real” rather than staged, increasing their trust and willingness to donate.

Why people said they were **least** likely to donate to ‘stereotypical portrayal’

Emotional manipulation & guilt framing: Images perceived as deliberately trying to provoke guilt or pressure donations feel manipulative and reduce willingness to act.

Lack of dignity and exploitation: Emphasising desperate need can make images feel exploitative, undermining trust and compassion.

Discomfort with negative stereotypes: Images portraying children as helpless and defined by poverty feel stereotypical, reductive, and off-putting.

Visual need cues that spark empathy and compassion for some can feel manipulative and trigger skepticism in others

Why people said they were **most** likely to donate to 'stereotypical portrayal'

Emotional activation: Images showing visible distress (sadness, hunger, crying, desperation) trigger empathy, heartbreak, and guilt that motivate action.



Because it's so depressing to see a child with so much sadness in her face the world should not be like this."

55-64, Female, Yorkshire and the Humber

I think it makes me feel guilty for not donating as the child is upset and crying."

25-34, Female, Scotland

I think the first picture shows desperation in their eyes which makes me feel empathetic towards them."

18-24, Female, South East

Why people said they were **least** likely to donate to 'stereotypical portrayal'

Emotional manipulation & guilt framing: Images perceived as deliberately trying to provoke guilt or pressure donations feel manipulative and reduce willingness to act.



Because this is an outdated and negative approach by playing on people's guilt when they had nothing to do with it and often fails to address the root causes."

35-44, Male, Scotland

It feels like it's taken to make someone feel guilty so they donate. I prefer to see happiness and the benefits rather than be emotionally manipulated."

35-44, Female, East Midlands

Trying to play on feelings and emotions. Trying to force people to donate through psychology."

25-34, Male, Yorkshire and the Humber

Highlighting desperation may create urgency, yet it also raises concerns about dignity and exploitation

Why people said they were **most** likely to donate to 'stereotypical portrayal'

Sense of urgent need: Visible suffering signals children are in immediate danger or hardship, making action feel urgent.



The images show that children are suffering and need the support and help as much as possible."

18-24, Female, London

Those children look to be the poorest and most at risk."

45-54, Female, Northern Ireland

Because in these photos the children look like they need the most help and support from charitable causes."

18-24, Male, North West

Why people said they were **least** likely to donate to 'stereotypical portrayal'

Lack of dignity and exploitation: Emphasising desperate need can make images feel exploitative, undermining trust and compassion.



Because it makes me feel like campaigners for the charity are not providing respect for the children by taking photos when they are at their most mentally vulnerable."

25-34, Female, West Midlands

It's degrading to see children having to beg for food or essentials. Every child deserves the basic needs."

25-34, Female, North West

I believe that this image was taken without their consent in their most vulnerable state, this has exploited them for only an economic gain.

18-24, Female, North West

For one world view, these stereotypical images reflect authentic hardship, yet for another they feel reductive and off putting

Why people said they were **most** likely to donate to 'stereotypical portrayal'

Perceived authenticity of suffering: Some felt these images appeared more “real” rather than staged, increasing their trust and willingness to donate.



They look more realistic and sad so I think I would want to help them more.”

18-24, Female, West Midlands

The images is real and live to me representing people who are seriously in need of help and of which I'm passionate about.”

25-34, Prefer not to say, London

It's the evidence of poverty and struggle, the rest are likely staged.”

18-24, Male, Yorkshire and the Humber

Why people said they were **least** likely to donate to 'stereotypical portrayal'

Discomfort with negative stereotypes: Images portraying children as helpless and defined by poverty feel stereotypical, reductive, and off-putting.



Offensive, outdated, stereotyped.”

35-44, Female, London

It's as if the photographer is trying to convey that the children are takers holding their hands out as if to say give it now. It's not an accurate representation of children.”

35-44, Female, North West

I don't find it a positive representation of the situation of the people involved.”

35-44, Male, East Midlands

Positive images appeal to optimistic and hopeful audiences, yet lack of visible need and overall clarity limits broader appeal

While ‘neutral/positive’ images were the least likely to motivate donations (17%), those who did respond to them were drawn to the hope, optimism, and aspirational vision of the future they represent.

However, almost twice as many respondents (30%) said these images were the ones they were least likely to donate to. This was largely due to a perceived lack of need and lack of context, which often resulted in a weaker emotional response.

This finding matches our in-market fundraising work—without visible need or context, appeals can struggle to create urgency or clearly communicate why support is required.

Why people said they were **most** likely to donate to ‘neutral/positive’ images

Hope and positivity as a motivator: Rather than sadness or guilt, these images evoke warmth, happiness, and optimism. This creates a feel-good response that encourages some people to give.

Aspirational future: These images represent the future some donors want to help create. They show possibility, progress, and empowerment rather than crisis.

Visible impact of donations: To some people, the imagery signals that donations make a positive difference.

Why people said they were **least** likely to donate to ‘neutral/positive’ images

Perceived lack of need: When children appear happy or healthy, some audiences assume support is no longer necessary, reducing urgency to give.

Motivation driven by suffering: Some donors explicitly say they are more compelled to give when hardship and struggle are visible.

Lack of emotional clarity or context: Without clear signals of need or impact, positive images can feel vague and fail to create a strong emotional response.

Hopeful imagery can motivate through optimism, but it can also reduce perceived urgency and desire to act

Why people said they were **most** likely to donate to 'neutral/positive' images

Hope and positivity as a motivator: Rather than sadness or guilt, these images evoke warmth, happiness, and optimism. This creates a feel-good response that encourages some people to give.

“ I like the brightness and the hope those images bring. It shows what my donation can do for people.”

18-24, Female, Yorkshire and the Humber

The way the photograph is taken with the lighting and everyone smiling, offers hope for the world. It's a very heartwarming image.”

18-24, Female, Scotland

Seeing happy faces as the result of giving is a more positive picture.”

65-74, Female, East of England

Why people said they were **least** likely to donate to 'neutral/positive' images

Perceived lack of need: When children appear happy or healthy, some audiences assume support is no longer necessary, reducing urgency to give.

“ They look happier than most and I want to make sure the most needing are available to be helped.

65-74, Male, Scotland

The picture I selected shows the children enjoying their lives which means that there's a chance that their basic needs are met along with the social amenities needed to sustain them.”

18-24, Female, London

They look well nourished and happy, not suggesting they are in hardship or needing help.”

65-74, Female, South East

A sense of progress and aspiration inspires some, yet for others visible struggle remains a stronger trigger for giving

Why people said they were **most** likely to donate to 'neutral/positive' images

Aspirational future: These images represent the future some donors want to help create. They show possibility, progress, and empowerment rather than crisis.



The image I chose as my first choice reflects how I'd like to see children - free and unburdened."

65-74, Female, South West

Seeing groups of children made happy [...] makes me feel better than the negative images. It makes me feel like it's possible to make life better for them."

35-44, Female, East Midlands

People in need can also smile. Smiles is a positive message that we can do something to improve."

45-54, Male, Scotland

Why people said they were **least** likely to donate to 'neutral/positive' images

Motivation driven by suffering: Some donors explicitly say they are more compelled to give when hardship and struggle are visible.



I personally would be less likely to donate if they were shown as happy. It's showing the pain and suffering that persuades me to donate."

18-24, Female, North West



I think because compared to other images, the children look happy and not in a struggle so I think I would be more likely to donate if I saw a picture of the struggle. I think it just makes me feel like it is needed more."

65-74, Female, East Midlands

Some perceived positive images as evidence of impact, while others saw a lack of emotion that resulted in indifference

Why people said they were **most** likely to donate to 'neutral/positive' images

Visible impact of donations: People are motivated when they can see the outcomes of support. The imagery signals that donations make a tangible difference and that the organisation is effective.



Children look happy as if they have benefited from the help they have been given."

45-54, Male, South East

Even though poor, the children look happy and are freely playing together. It suggests the charity has a positive impact on their lives."

45-54, Female, North West

They all give you good thoughts and feel that money before has done something."

25-34, Male, East of England

Why people said they were **least** likely to donate to 'neutral/positive' images

Lack of emotional clarity or context: Without clear signals of need or impact, positive images can feel vague and fail to create a strong emotional response.



It's not a very clear image and doesn't evoke much emotion within me."

18-24, Female, West Midlands

It does not really make me think of people in need it could just as easily be a family photo."

65-74, Male, Wales

Just shows happy children not what they are going through or how we can help them."

25-34, Female, South East

‘Impact/local teams’ images balance dignity, realism, and effectiveness, motivating donors while minimising deterrence

Imagery that showcases impact and local teams performed well across all measures. These images are seen as treating people with dignity and respect, as well as one in four (26%) saying they were most likely to donate to these images, driven by the combination of tangible impact and realistic, respectful portrayal of subjects

At the same time, these images were less likely to deter donations, with only one in five (22%) saying they were least likely to give, often due to a perceived lack of need or lower emotional pull.

Why people said they were **most** likely to donate to ‘impact/local teams’ images

Tangible results and effectiveness: Images showing practical outcomes (e.g., medical care, education, health initiatives) make donations feel meaningful and demonstrate the organisation’s impact.

Realism and trustworthiness: Audiences respond positively to imagery that feels unstaged and authentic, building confidence that donations reach those in need.

Dignity and empowerment: Portraying children and communities with respect, highlighting local agency, and avoiding saviour narratives strengthens motivations to act.

Why people said they were **least** likely to donate to ‘impact/local teams’ images

Perceived lack of need / low urgency: Children appearing well cared for can signal that support is already sufficient, reducing the sense of urgency to give.

Low emotional impact: Images of stability, happiness, or adequate care often fail to generate strong empathy or concern.

These images show tangible results and feel authentic which builds trust and confidence, making donors more likely to give

Why people said they were **most** likely to donate to 'impact/local teams' images

Tangible results and effectiveness: Images showing practical outcomes (e.g., medical care, education, health initiatives) make donations feel meaningful and demonstrate the organisation's impact.



Because it clearly showed the impact of donations and created an emotional connection that made the cause feel important and urgent.”

25-34, Male, Yorkshire and the Humber

It shows the work the charity does and doesn't make the children look 'pathetic', shows them being helped.”

45-54, Female, East of England

It looks not only positive and uplifting but it also presents charitable work in a light that shows less privileged children moving in the direction of progress thanks to these initiatives.”

35-44, Male, Scotland



It feels like a real and non staged image and therefore more trustworthy that those actions are what will be taken.”

18-24, Female, Wales

Because its shows something positive happens. African countries are not just poor, they have a lot and it needs to be seen in a positive light and see that it's growing.. instead of west dictating to it.”

55-64, Female, London

Avoiding white saviour tropes goes further to reinforce respect and trust for some audiences

Why people said they were **most** likely to donate to 'impact/local teams' images

Dignity and empowerment: Portraying children and communities with respect, highlighting local agency, and avoiding saviour narratives strengthens motivations to act.



They are dignifying and they are not just "white saviours". They're local doctors being supported by the charities which is better for sustainability and long term effect."

18-24, Female, South West

They are all representing local culture supporting their own culture, avoiding white man syndrome."

35-44, Male, Scotland

I feel the images show the children's plight without being disrespectful."

45-54, Male, Scotland

However, for some the lack of visible urgency or hardship can limit donor motivation

Why people said they were **least** likely to donate to 'impact/local teams' images

Perceived lack of need / low urgency: Children appearing well cared for can signal that support is already sufficient, reducing the sense of urgency to give.

“ I feel less likely to want to donate with this image as it shows them seeming completely fine and taken care of so they must not need it as much as others.”
35-44, Male, West Midlands

You can't really see the reason for donation. The children look healthy and happy.”
25-34, Female, South West

Because the child is being given an injection, this clearly indicates the children and community are being supported medically.”
18-24, Female, North West

Low emotional impact: Images of stability, happiness, or adequate care often fail to generate strong empathy or concern.

“ The image seems to show no one in extreme need any more than anyone in a developed country. In fact they look like they have a better life than most.”
45-54, Male, London

The image I selected doesn't really evoke a sense of emotion for me. The image displays people that look okay and collective but to me it doesn't display hardship or taking action to change something.”
18-24, Female, London

Finally, ‘white saviour’ imagery builds connection for some, but reinforces unequal power dynamics for others

While ‘white saviour’ imagery was the least likely to deter audiences (12%), they were no more effective at driving donations than ‘impact/local teams’ imagery (25% vs. 26%).

For some audiences, white saviour imagery demonstrates impact and creates a sense of connection by showing people helping in ways they can personally relate to; yet this can be problematic as it reinforces saviour stereotypes.

For others, these images directly highlight unequal power dynamics and outdated narratives, undermining trust and credibility.

Why people said they were **most** likely to donate to ‘white saviour’ images

Tangible results and effectiveness: Much like ‘impact/local teams’ images, showing aid in action makes the impact of donations visible, helping people feel their contribution will make a real difference.

Connection and relatability: Seeing charity workers directly engaging with children helps some audiences imagine themselves in their place, creating a personal connection to the cause.

Why people said they were **least** likely to donate to ‘white saviour’ images

Perceived lack of need / low urgency: As with ‘impact/local teams’ images, seeing visible support can signal that needs are already being met, reducing urgency to give.

Awareness of negative stereotypes and power imbalances: Discomfort with imagery that reinforces ‘white saviour’ narratives, viewing it as outdated, condescending and rooted in unequal power dynamics.

These images show tangible results and help build connection and relatability, making donors more likely to give

Why people said they were **most** likely to donate to 'white saviour' images

Tangible results and effectiveness: Much like 'impact/local teams' images, showing aid in action makes the impact of donations visible, helping people feel their contribution will make a real difference.

“ This is because I can see the needy people actually receiving the help they need and I love real smiles.”

25-34, Female, East of England

Because it illustrates a charity's work in action and shows a positive outcome of donated funds.”

45-54, Male, North West

Shows the proactiveness of the charity, doesn't try to guilt you into donating.”

35-44, Male, London

Connection and relatability: Seeing charity workers directly engaging with children helps some audiences imagine themselves in their place, creating a personal connection to the cause.

“ It shows actively that the organisation are helping the kids and this could transverse to whoever donates to possibly be that person helping them too by donating or actively doing something.”

18-24, Female, North West

I think they look trustworthy and like they genuinely want to help those they say they will.”

25-34, Male, West Midlands

I chose it because the supporter brought himself to the level of the child so that he can understand him better.”

25-34, Female, West Midlands

However, many potential donors question the need, while others see these reinforce problematic power imbalances

Why people said they were **least** likely to donate to 'white saviour' images

Perceived lack of need / low urgency: As with 'impact/local teams' images, seeing visible support can signal that needs are already being met, reducing urgency to give.



They seem to be getting the most help so far out of all the other images but still deserve to be seen and heard."

18-24, Female, London

If they can stand a full day in school, there is nothing at all wrong with these people and do not need our money."

45-54, Male, South East

Because they look like they are getting the help they need."

55-64, Male, South East



I'm uncomfortable with the image of white adults handing things out to black children. It promotes negative stereotypes."

45-54, Female, South East

A lot of charities seemingly have this weird way of professing that the white ppl are the saviours and educators of the 3rd world which ticks me off a bit."

18-24, Male, Yorkshire and the Humber

There is a caution in me regarding the power dynamic in the image. I would want to research the charity more before giving to them."

35-44, Female, North East



Appendix C - AI Imagery

The AI-generated images we tested

To understand the current sentiment to AI-generated images in fundraising, we showed the following images with respondents, asking them “Which one of these images are you most likely to donate to?”

We then asked “The image you selected is AI generated. Knowing this information, would you still donate to a charity if they used this image in their marketing materials?” where the answers available were ‘Yes,’ ‘No’ or ‘Unsure’ (order randomised).

