



The struggle for safety

Building public support for
refugees and asylum seekers

imix

An edenstanley project

This narrative guide has been developed by IMIX and partners to help those championing refugee protection, based on a large body of existing research, some new research of our own, and input from people with lived experience of the immigration system and their advocates.

It proposes a ‘values-based’ approach, appealing to motivations most of us hold in common, with an emphasis on purposeful storytelling to drive societal change.

Refugee protection is a live and dynamic agenda, with a growing body of information from research programmes, polling statistics and first-hand testimonies continually coming on stream, which can be sourced from various organisations including IMIX, its partners, and members of the Asylum Reform Initiative.

A warm thank you to the IMIX funders who made this work possible.



1 Foreword

2 Introduction

About this report	04
How we developed this narrative	04

3 Who we’re talking to

Audiences and aims for our narrative	05
--------------------------------------	----

4 The struggle for safety

5 Why the struggle for safety?

It sets an alternative agenda	10
It sparks empathy	10
It helps us tells stories, not stand on a soapbox	10
It provides a platform for experts by experience	10
It makes people feel empowered to act	10

6 Avoiding the traps

The approaches that aren’t working	11
The struggle for safety	12

7 From values to action

Values worth activating	13
Sparking action	13
Thinking local	13
Linking to the policy agenda	13

Learning from others	13
How to support refugees: some call-to-action ideas	13

8 Communicating about refugees and asylum seekers: a checklist

9 Five stories

Fleeing for your life	16
Friends and family lost	17
The mother’s dilemma	18
Lost in limbo	19
Safe at last	20
Stories that stick	21

10 Key messages

Message matrix	22
An example of a message matrix	22
Fifty words	23

11 Over to you

12 Appendix

Audience insight: literature review	25
Audience insight: primary research	25
Project partners	25

Imagine a world where someone who arrives in a new country as a refugee is welcomed and accepted, treated with kindness and understanding, and able to build a new life.

A world where anyone forced to flee their home is believed when they tell their story of persecution and violence.

In this world refugees are not demonised, or treated as an easy scapegoat for society's ills. Here, they can't be instrumentalised for political gain, because the public simply won't stand for it.

We believe such a world is possible.

The last few decades have seen a transformation in social norms on sexuality, race and mental health. In mainstream society, the common narratives about these issues are shifting from exclusion and blame, to acceptance and even pride.

We can change the narrative about refugees too.

Introduction

We need to **change the narrative** about refugees and asylum seekers.

Many of the dominant media and political narratives cause harm. They provide an excuse for poor service provision for people who arrive in the UK. They can lead to refugees and asylum seekers being abused and stigmatised.

Such narratives also provide cover for increasingly punitive restrictions. They make it harder to build a consensus for positive change, even among the growing proportion of the UK public we know would support it.

The good news is that we can change this. We've already made progress in building support for refugees within many of our communities across the UK.

Now we need to build on these successes and achieve lasting social and systemic change.

To do this we need to tell a story about the experience of refugees and asylum seekers arriving and settling in the UK, and work together to make that story stick – without being knocked off course by the next crisis, or being led by our opponents' agendas.

Our ambition is big and may take time – perhaps even a generation. It is not about a single campaign, although the path we take must support all of our campaigning activity, as well as our fundraising, volunteering and community engagement programmes.

The goal is bigger. We want to motivate many more people to show support for our cause, create a consensus of opinion, and ultimately redefine what's considered acceptable by the mainstream in the treatment of people who seek sanctuary in the UK.

About this report

This report explains our narrative for communicating about refugees and asylum seekers. It's a toolkit for telling *stories with purpose*. In other words, stories that connect with people's values, motivating them to welcome refugees and asylum seekers into their communities. Stories that create the conditions for policy change, and that help our sector campaign more effectively together. We invite you to use the toolkit so we can work together as one voice.

How we developed this narrative

Building on a wealth of prior work from organisations including Freedom from Torture, British Future, More in Common and others, a partnership of refugee and asylum seeker sector organisations, convened by IMIX in conjunction with the Asylum Reform Initiative and Together with Refugees Coalition, worked with strategic communications agency Eden Stanley to develop the narrative.

We first reviewed existing audience research on attitudes to refugees, and evaluated current and previous sector initiatives, including through a workshop of 28 partners.

We worked with the partners to select and prioritise public target audiences at a second workshop.

We used a third workshop to develop a range of narrative 'territories', and then tested these through qualitative research with priority public audiences, to understand which were most likely to motivate our target audiences.

The most promising narrative territory has been further developed, to reinforce and build on what works.

You can find a full list of research references and partner organisations at the end of this report.

We need to tell a story about the experience of refugees and asylum seekers arriving and settling in the UK, and **work together to make that story stick.**

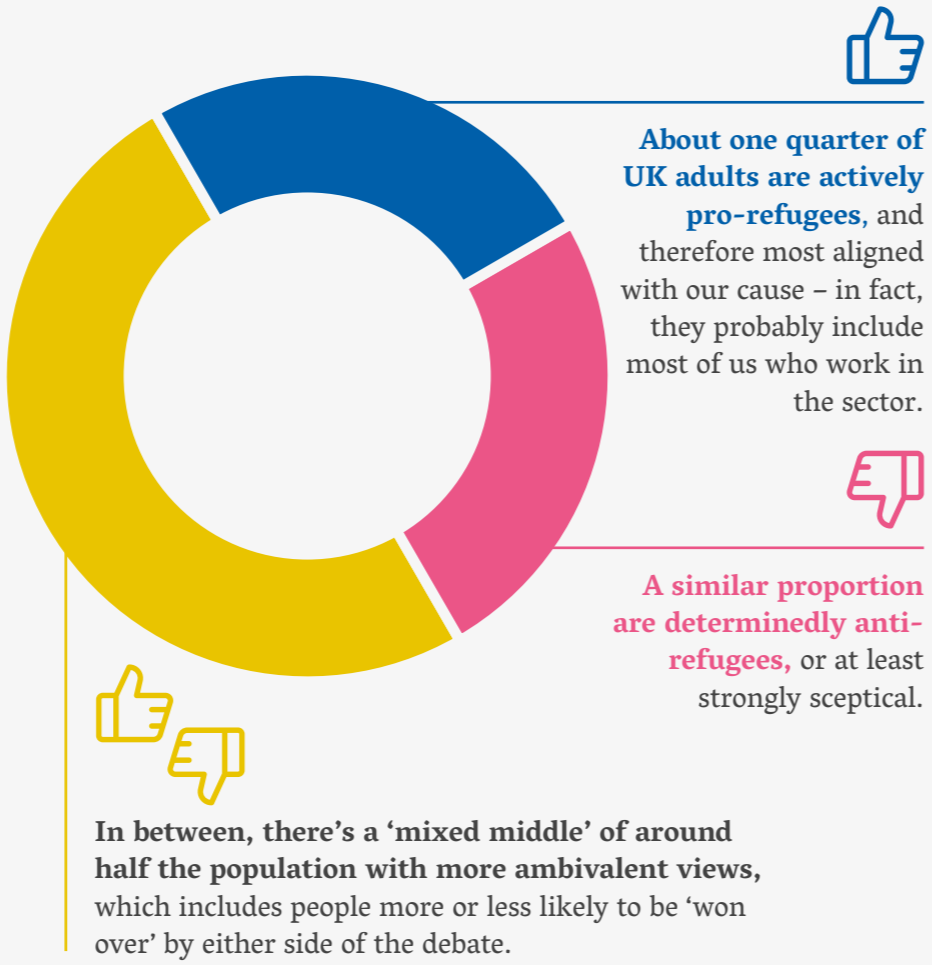
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Who we're talking to

Plenty of people in the UK share at least some of our perspectives on refugees and asylum.

But not everyone is on our side, and some may never agree with us. If we want to shift social norms and motivate more people to act in support of refugees, then it makes sense to addressing our communications to those most likely to engage positively. After all, we're far more likely to broaden support for our cause by encouraging people to engage their friends and communities, than by trying to win stand-up arguments on social media. But likewise, we can't just 'sing to the choir' by talking only to those that fully agree with us, and risk further marginalising our cause. A balance must be struck. So, who should we target?

When you ask the UK public their views on refugees and asylum seekers, their answers usually place them in one of three big groups:



Audiences and aims for our narrative

We've developed this narrative to help us achieve these broad audience aims:

Mobilise our base

Among the one in four who are most pro-refugee, there is a core group that is both aligned to our cause, and motivated to act. They are often young or mid-life urban professionals, politically-engaged, and active in their support of social justice causes.

Activate the inactive

Among this same pro-refugee quarter of the population, there is a sizeable group who agree with us, but who don't currently express this through action. They are broadly supportive of social justice causes but tend to hold such views with less conviction. They are often active in local communities and include an above average proportion of women.

Broaden support into the mainstream

We know there is a sub-group within the 'mixed middle' half of the population who may support us if we find a way of talking about refugees that reaches and resonates with them. It comprises people who are socially liberal, politically moderate, and who have a strong sense of personal agency. They are often middle-class, pro-market, and believe people are responsible for their own outcomes – so, for example, they may reject messaging that simply evokes 'entitlement'.

Together, these audiences – the most aligned and a portion of the persuadable 'mixed middle' – add up to over one third of UK adults.



Who we're talking to

These three audience groups are distinct from each other. But they hold a number of **attitudes** and **values** in common.



All value openness and diversity in society.

They are outward-looking and proud of the UK's inclusiveness, and agree division and inequality are issues that need tackling.

They view immigration positively and believe most people make an effort to integrate.

They believe anyone can be British, regardless of colour, background or accent. They are increasingly concerned about racism in the UK.

They have high personal agency.

They believe citizens' actions can change society, that most people can be trusted, and that you can disagree with someone without giving up on them.

Among these audiences are many people who will act in support of refugees.

For some, this might simply be expressing empathy, or an openness to meet and mix with refugees in their own communities. For others, especially among the most aligned and active, it means taking part in campaigns, donating, fundraising or volunteering.

The story we share is about

the struggle for safety

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It's about safety

When people flee from their homes it is because they are unsafe – because their neighbourhood has become a warzone, or they are at risk of violence or persecution. They should be able to find routes to safety in countries like the UK, and be confident they'll find peace.

They should feel safe as soon as they arrive, not in further danger, or left in limbo for months or years.

They should have the chance to build a new life, living in peace and security, with the opportunity to give back to the community that welcomed them.



It's about the struggle

It's never easy to flee from the only life you've known. Especially if it means leaving loved ones behind. But it's a choice that has to be faced if you're in a war zone or facing persecution or violence. Let's never forget the reasons why people are forced to flee.

Without safe routes away from danger, many who flee face even more struggles on their journeys to find sanctuary. Survival takes great resilience and determination to succeed.

It's about overcoming the odds

When your life as you knew it is ripped away, the odds of ever feeling safe again are seriously stacked against you.

Despite the low chances of success, some still try to reach a place of sanctuary. Many perish on the journey – seized, killed, or drowned. Without safe routes, or any certainty that asylum will be offered, only a few ever succeed. For those that do, we can help them build a new life for themselves in peace.

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overcoming the odds

safety

the struggle

Our narrative in a nutshell

When you're **forced** from your home and country, **the odds of feeling safe again** are seriously stacked against you. **Despite the dangers**, many still try – ordinary women, men and their families making **extraordinary efforts to find peace** in a safe and welcoming community. It's within our power to ensure they find **routes to safety**, and to help them build a new life for themselves.

Why the struggle for safety?

It sets an alternative agenda.

Changing a societal narrative – changing how society *thinks about an issue* – takes long-term, consistent and disciplined work.

By talking about the struggle for safety as often as we can, we are less likely to evoke our opponents’ favoured ‘frames’, like *cultural threat*, *scarcity of resources*, or *criminality*. Nor will we be drawn into technocratic and system reform arguments that can go quickly out of date. These arguments do have to be made, of course, but always in the context of a story about the struggle for safety.

It can feel boring to keep repeating the same messages over and over again. We’re communicators, so naturally we want to keep inventing new ways to keep an issue fresh. But there is value in repetition. There’s an old communications adage: when you’ve become bored with saying the same thing over and over, someone else will just be hearing it for the first time.

It sparks empathy

Talking about the struggle for safety activates compassion and empathy, which research shows are more likely to build support, compared with talking about laws, systems and structures, or simply presenting hard facts. In the absence of empathy, making legal arguments, for example, is unlikely to inspire public support, when others will simply argue that the law needs to change. Following this path, entire arguments can play out without a moment of humanity.

The struggle for safety narrative shows refugees’ resilience and determination to succeed against the odds. When we see someone displaying these qualities, we instinctively want them to succeed. We know that in the UK, in particular, being on the side of the underdog is a widely-held principle.

Talking about the struggle for safety also means we can show something of the real lives and experiences of people who can seem different. It allows us to open a window into worlds that many people just don’t know – and show refugees not just as political pawns but as people with lives as interesting and complex as anyone else’s – be they mothers, brothers, painters, yoga nuts, bus drivers, bakers or dancers.

Refugees’ home cultures, their experiences, their journeys – these will often stimulate the imaginations of our audiences. This is especially true when stories are brought to life in vivid ways – through personal testimony, photography and film.

It helps us tell stories, not stand on a soapbox

Our research also shows that real examples of people in perilous situations, or being failed by the asylum system, are more likely to motivate action than talking about abstract principles like equality, fairness, or justice. We also know our audiences respond better to stories about people’s lives, that are genuinely interesting, and where they can ‘join the dots’ and reach their own conclusions about what the story is telling them. Nobody likes being told how to feel, and most will reject any message where they suspect their motives or values are being called into question.

Talking about the struggle for safety means telling tangible stories people can relate to and find meaning in, rather than trumpeting abstract principles that many people will automatically feel suspicious of, or disagree with, or simply be bored by. After all, most of the ‘arguments’ are familiar, as are the rebuttals.

It provides a platform for experts by experience

First person stories of the struggle for safety, told by and from the perspective of people who themselves fled war, persecution or violence, are often the most compelling. This narrative supports current and former refugees to take a pivotal role as messengers. And this in turn reminds our audiences that refugees are people they may see and meet every day in their own communities. In particular, talking about the struggle for safety allows us to foreground the experiences of women and girls, and rebalance gender representation in the prevailing narratives. Our opponents often draw attention to the number of young adult men who arrive in the UK seeking asylum, in the knowledge that, however unfairly, they are less likely to spark compassion than the women and children forced to flee. But women and girls are frequently at the heart of the struggle for safety – a mother who sends away her son to avoid state-sanctioned punishment for homosexuality or forced conscription, or the women who themselves flee violence or persecution.

It makes people feel empowered to act

Our audience research shows people can feel moved by a message, but not motivated to act. Or they may want to act, but don’t know what they can realistically do that will make a difference on such a big issue. Talking about the struggle for safety is an effective backdrop to specific calls to action, because it shows what an individual can achieve – and in doing so remind our audience of their own agency. We can build on this by pointing them to actions they can take – like visible acts of support and solidarity, volunteering, giving or campaigning.

Avoiding the traps

The approaches that aren’t working.

Our sector has for a long time challenged negative media and political narratives on refugee and asylum issues. Some initiatives have yielded positive results, like Refugees Welcome, the campaign for Windrush Justice, Refugee Week, and grassroots activity in local communities and with local media. And in some communities, the growing number of resettled refugees has led to increased social contact, and changed attitudes for the better.

In developing the ‘struggle for safety’ narrative, we have been led by evidence on what is most likely to work, but also by sector experience of the approaches that have failed to make a difference – often because they have either been co-opted by our opponents or rejected by the public.

Narrative approaches to handle with care

The ‘golden rule’

The principle of ‘doing as you would be done by’ is a universal adage that is difficult to argue with. Some research has shown that messages that invite people to reflect on what they would do in the same situation as someone forced to flee, and the help that they would want from others, can help build empathy. There does seem to be a place for this kind of messaging, if handled carefully.

However, research also shows that while evoking the ‘golden rule’ can ring true, many within our target audiences feel it’s stating the obvious – and not enough by itself to motivate action or pressure for change. It can come across as ‘preachy’, as it appears to take a moral viewpoint. Some people will therefore reject it as an attempt to judge them, or to divide society between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ thinking people, or cite it as part of the wider ‘culture wars’ that seem to be happening in the UK.

And for some, it’s impossible to imagine themselves ever in the same situation as someone forced to flee – life in such fragile circumstances is a world away – so it is simply not a credible message for them.

National pride

It’s tempting to point to the UK’s ‘proud history’ as a liberal democracy that welcomes immigrants, as a way to normalise the welcoming of refugees now. Or to highlight the prevailing rhetoric about ‘Global Britain’ to make the case for our obligations as a beacon of leadership.

Audience research shows that this kind of approach can be confusing and even alienating – and, for many, in conflict with their own perception of Britain right now. It can appear jingoistic and, for some, even evoke ideas of dominance and empire. Sector experience shows messaging that leads on our ‘proud history’ can be co-opted by antagonists, who use this as cover for draconian policies (because we’ve ‘done our bit’), and to even argue it’s anti-British to talk down our ‘fair’ system.

The ‘contribution’ narrative

We sometimes try to engage the public by arguing that refugees make a positive contribution to our society and economy. While research shows these narratives inspire support (and, of course, are true), they risk instrumentalising refugees by implying their value is determined solely by the contribution they make. Again, sector experience shows this frame can also be co-opted by opponents, who use it to reinforce divisive ideas of ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy’ refugees.

The appeal to our ‘best selves’

Messages that encourage us to be our best selves, to display positive values like tolerance, generosity and compassion are sometimes used to reinforce or promote particular behaviours – in this case, behaving kindly towards refugees and asylum seekers. Our research shows that among those who are already pro-refugee, these kinds of messages can help us feel validated and good about ourselves.

We also know that others in our audiences see it as playing to divisions in society between those who value tolerance and compassion and those who do not – and by default those who could do better. And some audiences just don’t believe everyone is compassionate – so it fails to ring true.

Sticking just to the facts

It’s easy to think facts and statistics that show the ‘real’ picture will change minds by virtue of their objective truth – because they fill knowledge gaps or refute misinformation. Of course, informing, clarifying and correcting misinformation is important, especially when we’re talking to journalists, technical experts and policy makers. However, there’s strong evidence that adopting an ‘information deficit’ communications model with the public – that is, operating on the basis that people who disagree with us lack knowledge on an issue and simply need educating – is usually ineffective. Among those that oppose us, their deeply-held values act as a filter for the information they receive, and facts can be reorganised to suit a different agenda.



The struggle for safety

Talking about the struggle for safety **avoids** many of the potential traps.

- It foregrounds the individual or family's need to flee, and the obstacles they have to overcome to **get to safety**, rather than relying on 'British values', impersonal statistics, or moral arguments.
- It doesn't make a judgement about who is 'worthy' based on their potential economic contribution or their moral character. The person who arrives here deserves to succeed by virtue of the odds they're overcome and the struggle they've made.
- It sparks empathy, while seeking to empower and motivate people to act – rather than simply asking 'what if this were you?', which can trigger a defensive response.
- It uses the principle of 'show don't tell', appealing to positive, humanitarian values without telling people how they should feel.
- It can link individual actions – such as helping communities feel more welcoming to refugees – **to calls for national-level policy change**, such as providing routes to safety and a quick, efficient and compassionate asylum system.



From values to action

Understanding the deep-rooted values of our audiences can help us produce messages that are more resonant, and **more likely to motivate action**, compared with just appealing to reason.

Values worth activating

Our research looked at some of the values held in common by our priority audiences, and found that when these four were emphasised in our messaging, there was a stronger emotional response:

Security: our need to feel safe and secure within a stable environment. This is a particularly important value among our less closely aligned ‘mixed middle’ audience.

Universalism: our desire to support and protect others, whoever and wherever they are. This value is found most strongly in our most aligned audiences.

Benevolence: the wish to ensure those closest to us are taken care of – a strong motivator for the ‘mixed middle’ audiences.

Stimulation: our interest in whatever is new or interesting, activated when we learn something we didn’t already know, or have information provided to us in a fresh way.

Sparking action

Whenever possible, our stories should spark action, and our audiences should be left in no doubt about twhat we’re asking them to do. Without a credible, tangible call to action, we risk being seen as ‘virtue signalling’, that is, showing off our values for the approval of those who already agree with us. Our job is not simply to tell people we’re ‘right’.

The good news is that the public audiences we want to reach strongly believe citizens’ actions – *their actions* – can make a difference. But that doesn’t automatically make them campaigners for our cause. Beyond the most active section of our most aligned audiences, few are likely to take big or overtly political actions, like offering a home to a refugee, or attending a demonstration.

Thinking local

We need to think more about the small, close-to-home actions people can take, and use these

as the starting point for sensitising them to the larger issues at stake. Telling people about the experiences of refugees in their local area can help them feel this is an issue that matters. A small, tangible action in support of refugees can help them connect the local picture to the bigger national picture. And once they do that, they’re more likely to pay attention to what policy makers are doing, and how they can influence this.

Linking to the policy agenda

We know that social change campaigns have more chance of success when they also promote policy change.

Why? Because campaigning to change policy is how organisations and individuals signal the type of society they want to live in – and they expect their efforts to be matched by those of the state. So, if individuals try to improve the welcome refugees receive in their communities,

or take some other meaningful action, then they are more likely to expect the government to do its part too, for example, by providing safe routes and honouring rights to asylum.

Learning from others

We are, of course, not the only ones who have tried to drive social change on a vital and potentially divisive issue. By taking a values-based approach and setting our own narrative frame over the long term, rather than purely reacting to our antagonists, we are emulating the successes of other progressive movements and campaigns, from LGBTQ+ rights to action on climate change.


Within our own sector, the outcry over the Government’s treatment of the Windrush generation shows how public sentiment can be built and mobilised through storytelling and an appeal to their deep-rooted values. Ultimately the public was not won over by legal argument, but by learning about the human cost of a cold-hearted policy.

How to support refugees: some call-to-action ideas

There are countless things you can ask people to do to support refugee protection, that will appeal to different audiences at different times. We’ve compiled a few examples here, mostly sourced from our friends and partners campaigning for change. Why not promote some of these, seek out others (there are many!), or come up with some of your own?

imix.org.uk/action

Check out our web page of resources, imix.org.uk/action, including links to the initiatives listed here, which we’ll keep updated as we learn about new projects. We’d love to hear about yours.



Stand together with refugees

- Add an orange heart to your social media profile • See *Together with Refugees*.

Wear your support with pride • See *Choose Love*.

Learn more about the facts • Find out more about the journeys people take to seek safety • See *IMIX*.

Arm yourself with the facts • See *resources from the Refugee Council, British Red Cross, UNHCR and others*.

Read and share a refugee’s story • See *UNHCR and IMIX*.



Help refugees in your community • Donate clothes and food • See *Care4Calais*.

Host a refugee at home • See *Refugees at Home, and Room for Refugees*.

Welcome a refugee into your community • See *Reset, and Sponsor Refugees*.

Donate a bicycle and get refugees on the road • See *The Bike Project*.

Support refugees to build new lives
Volunteer as an English teacher or classroom assistant (North-East) • See *Action Foundation*.

Help people develop skills so they can get into work • See *Breaking Barriers*.

Strengthen charities’ voice for change
Donate to or fundraise to a charity supporting refugees • *Too many to mention – perhaps start with our project partners listed in the appendix*.

Add your voice to the sector’s calls for change • See *the Asylum Matters Newsletter to keep up to date with sector campaigns*.

Join a campaign like the one to allow asylum seekers to work • See *Refugee Action*.

For links to these and more, go to imix.org.uk/action

Communicating about refugees and asylum seekers: a checklist

Try to...

...appeal to people's **compassion**, rather than rely exclusively on rational argument.

...share stories that **show the struggle for safety**, and ensure balanced representation by foregrounding women and girls.

...show, don't tell. Stimulate your audience's imaginations and let them **discover the meaning in your stories for themselves**.

...think local whenever **possible**, and sensitise people to what's happening close to home, and **how they can help** their communities be more welcoming.

...point to a credible, **tangible action people can take**, that doesn't always feel too antagonistic or hard work.

...talk about the specific **policy changes** that would enable more routes to safety and a more **compassionate, efficient asylum system**.

Avoid...

...adopting the moral **high ground**, for example by trying to make public audiences feel guilty or suggesting they would be better people if they agreed with you.

...patronising your **audience**, by implying that those who do not agree with you aren't in possession of the facts, or need educating to 'open their eyes'.

...leaning too heavily on **patriotism**, by citing Britain's role as a global beacon of democracy and tolerance.

...overcomplicating – for example using difficult legal or technical terms, or by trying to fit every nuance into every message.

...virtue signalling, by making grand statements about how something should be done, without being clear about what that 'something' is.

...sticking only to abstract **principles**. For example, for example talking only about 'rights', 'justice', or 'equality', without also painting a picture of the world we want to see, or telling the story of those who have fled violence and been left in limbo for years.

Five stories

There is an infinite number of stories we can tell that convey the **struggle for safety**. Here are five.

Each of these five stories shines a spotlight on one part of the journey refugees take to reach safety, and helps our audiences relate to the people in them. And in the way we choose to tell them – the people, details, events and emotions we decide to include – each story can help reinforce the three pillars of our narrative.

It's about **safety**

It's about **the struggle**

It's about **overcoming the odds**

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01

Fleeing for your life

A story about the difficult and often dangerous moment when you're forced to leave behind your home and country

02

Friends and family lost

A story about the high stakes involved in attempting to find safety, and the traumatic losses along the way

03

The mother's dilemma

A story about the additional dangers faced by those trying to keep their family safe, in a world where they don't know who to trust

04

Lost in limbo

A story about the ongoing struggle and uncertainty even once you've arrived in a 'safe' country

05

Safe at last

A story about the efforts refugees make to build a new peaceful life for themselves and their families, and to become part of the communities they now call home

Each time we tell a version of one of these stories, focused on the experience of one person or family, we reinforce our larger narrative: about the struggle for safety.

As a reminder, that this is about telling *stories with purpose* – connecting with people's values, highlighting what needs to change, and motivating our audience to want to play a more active part in welcoming refugees and asylum seekers into their communities.

In the following pages are the five stories in more detail. We've included some real stories, told wherever possible by the people who lived them, to show how powerful such stories can be.

01

Fleeing for your life

Perhaps it's a mother sending her son away, to avoid forcible conscription by extremist forces. Or a family with young children who find themselves in a squalid refugee camp after their home was destroyed in a civil war. Some will have no idea if or where they'll find safety, while others will think of the UK, a country they've been told all their lives has good values, and where they may have family.



Why we tell this story

To show the extreme circumstances that force ordinary people to flee their home and country, and why they might choose the UK as their destination.



What we want to see change

The UK to use its global influence to address the issues that cause ordinary people to have to flee.

I fled men with
machetes at age 12

Nobody decides to leave home for no reason. When I was 12, men with machetes came to our house. It was the early days of the genocide in Rwanda. They beat my father unconscious. My mother, who was a nurse and heavily pregnant, talked the men into giving us a few minutes. It was enough time for us to flee for our lives, without any possessions.

Every step of our escape from Rwanda and the threat of death was fraught with its own dangers. I was smuggled into the UK, and eventually given refugee status. I'm a community and youth worker now, building a new life in Norfolk. The fear never leaves you entirely, but I believe in the African concept of Ubuntu – 'I am because we are'. It reminds me that we are all connected, and can't be ourselves without others.

Marie-Lyse

02

Friends and family lost

This is where we tell the story of the journey – the weeks or months where the home someone once knew is no longer an option, and a final, peaceful destination still feels far ahead and uncertain. These journeys can be perilous – those undertaking it may see fellow journey-makers seized, killed, or drowned. There are many moments where they fear for their own lives.



Why we tell this story

To show the dangers of the journey to the UK, and that for every person who reaches safety, many more are stopped, or even perish on the way.



What we want to see change

Safe routes for people fleeing war, persecution and violence, so they can find sanctuary.

I lost my mum and brother while trying to seek asylum by boat

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My family were getting ready to board a boat from North Africa to Italy when we became separated. In the midst of chaos and crowds, I was put on the boat – aged 13, old enough to go with the men – while my mum and little brother stayed behind with the other women and children. I didn't even have time to hug them.

The three of us had left Eritrea four years earlier, to avoid future military conscription for me and my brother. But it was hard finding somewhere safe – we got caught in the war in Yemen and faced criminals in Egypt. I was exhausted and never felt calm. Crossing the Mediterranean should have been a route to peace. But a few weeks after I arrived, my mother and little brother died trying to make the same journey.

After months alone among refugee camps and foster families in Italy, I came to the UK to join my aunt, a British citizen. Four years on, I'm looking forward to studying civil engineering at university.

Ridwan

03

The mother's dilemma

The setting for this story might be a border crossing, or a refugee camp. It may be about a mother trying to decide how to keep all her children safe. Should she trust the corrupt police officer? The people smuggler? Or it may be that the family in the refugee camp can only raise the money to send one member in search of safety. What these stories have in common is that there are no good choices. But staying put is often the least safe option.



Why we tell this story

To show the additional dangers facing those who are trying to keep their family safe, as well as themselves, and the opportunities for criminals or corrupt individuals when there are no safe routes.



What we want to see change

Safe routes for families fleeing warzones, or other perils, to seek sanctuary.

Forced to cross by unscrupulous smugglers

Smugglers offered Shiva and her family a relatively safe passage across the English Channel. But after selling what belongings she had to raise €5,000, the smugglers reneged on the deal, and their places went to another family able to pay more. Hopeless and disappointed, Shiva handed her money instead to another smuggler who charged less. He forced the family to cross when the weather was bad, in an overcrowded boat, telling them: cross now or you won't get your money back.

Shiva's family had left Iran two months earlier to escape poverty and persecution as Kurds. They ended up in a refugee camp in Calais. Shiva had 'many beautiful dreams' for her children, according to a friend, and hoped they would make a new life in the UK. Instead, Shiva, her husband, and all three of their children perished when their overcrowded boat capsized. The youngest, 15-month-old Artin, was only found weeks later when his body washed up on the Norwegian coast.

Shiva Mohammad Panahi



O4 Lost in limbo

This story is about someone stuck in detention or temporary accommodation, with no defined status, or confirmation they can stay, or any right to work. In this story, all they do is wait. No one can tell them how long it will be, or whether they'll be forced to return to a country ripped apart by civil war, or where they'll face violence and persecution. It may be years before they find peace – if ever.



Why we tell this story

To show that even after arriving in the UK, those seeking asylum face delays and uncertainty, exacerbated by a hostile and ineffective asylum system. This stops them feeling safe or able to become part of a new community.



What we want to see change

A more compassionate and effective system for dealing fairly with asylum seekers, and rights for those awaiting decisions, including the right to work and join a community

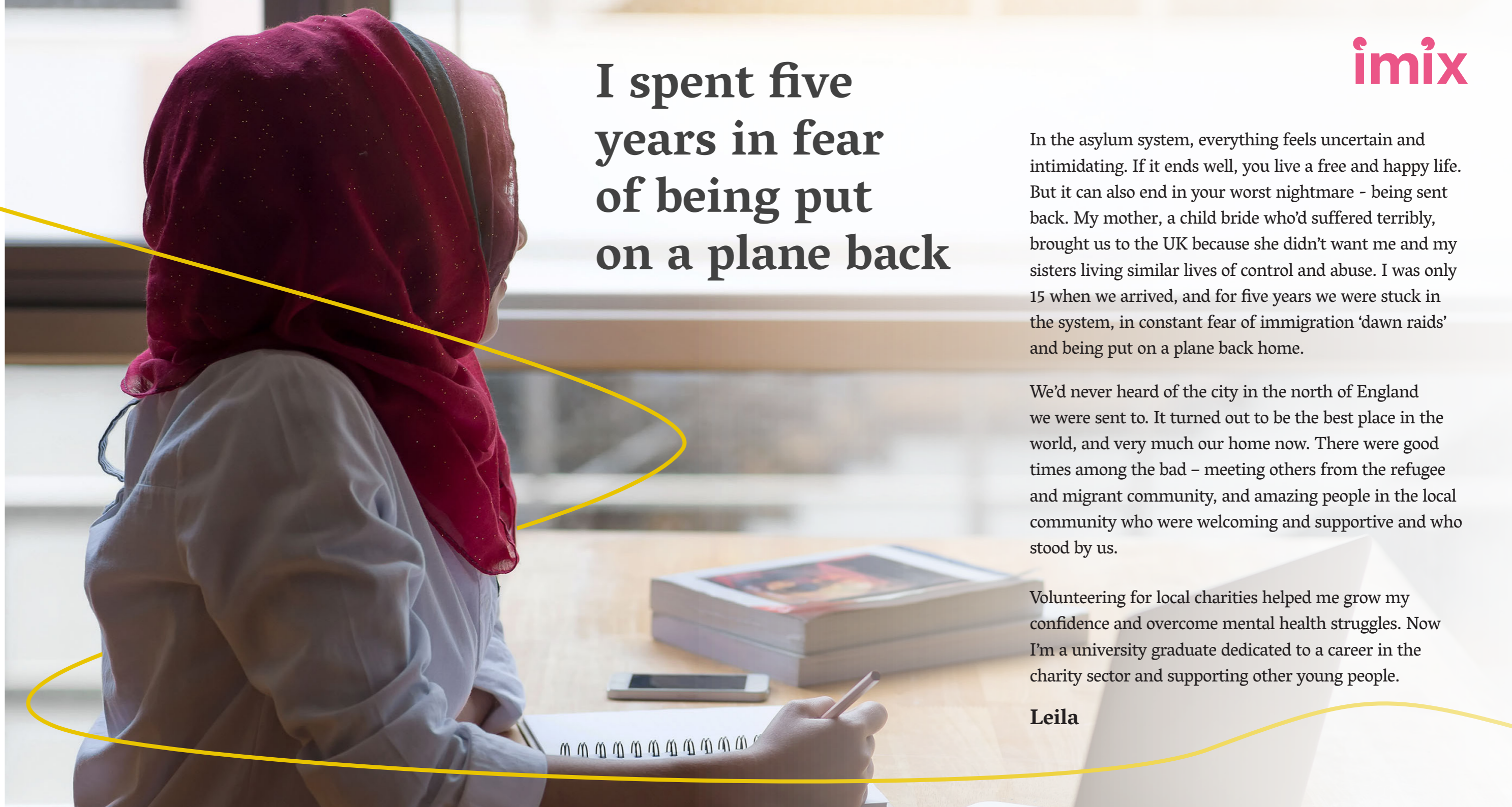
I spent five years in fear of being put on a plane back

In the asylum system, everything feels uncertain and intimidating. If it ends well, you live a free and happy life. But it can also end in your worst nightmare - being sent back. My mother, a child bride who'd suffered terribly, brought us to the UK because she didn't want me and my sisters living similar lives of control and abuse. I was only 15 when we arrived, and for five years we were stuck in the system, in constant fear of immigration 'dawn raids' and being put on a plane back home.

We'd never heard of the city in the north of England we were sent to. It turned out to be the best place in the world, and very much our home now. There were good times among the bad – meeting others from the refugee and migrant community, and amazing people in the local community who were welcoming and supportive and who stood by us.

Volunteering for local charities helped me grow my confidence and overcome mental health struggles. Now I'm a university graduate dedicated to a career in the charity sector and supporting other young people.

Leila



O5

Safe at last

Stories like this are set in our audiences' familiar surroundings – the communities and workplaces we all know well. Perhaps it's a story about a woman finally able to restart her legal career, or a young man getting to know his colleagues at the local hospital, where he works as a porter. He enjoys his job, and having the means to take care of his young family. But he still remembers when we had to flee for his life, and the resilience he had to dig deep to find.



Why we tell this story

To show that it's possible for someone who arrived in the UK as a refugee to build another life, integrated into a community, and feeling valued in their work. They are people our audience encounters in their own lives. And it shows the struggle for safety can have a happy ending.



What we want to see change

Support for people who arrive in this country to live peaceful, productive lives, integrated within communities, without fear of this right being taken away.

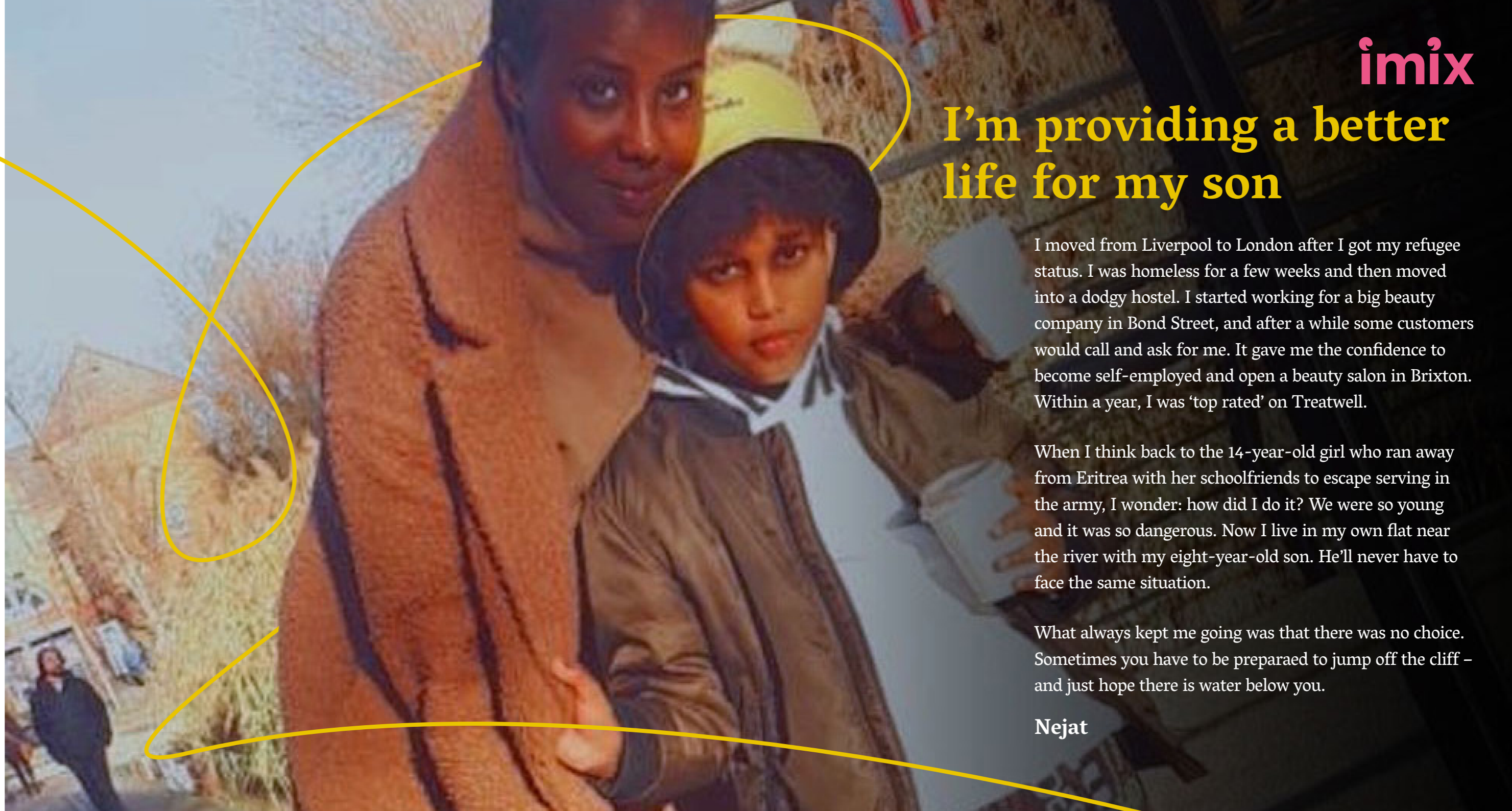
I'm providing a better life for my son

I moved from Liverpool to London after I got my refugee status. I was homeless for a few weeks and then moved into a dodgy hostel. I started working for a big beauty company in Bond Street, and after a while some customers would call and ask for me. It gave me the confidence to become self-employed and open a beauty salon in Brixton. Within a year, I was 'top rated' on Treatwell.

When I think back to the 14-year-old girl who ran away from Eritrea with her schoolfriends to escape serving in the army, I wonder: how did I do it? We were so young and it was so dangerous. Now I live in my own flat near the river with my eight-year-old son. He'll never have to face the same situation.

What always kept me going was that there was no choice. Sometimes you have to be prepared to jump off the cliff – and just hope there is water below you.

Nejat



Stories that stick

Stories that stay with people are the stories that ‘satisfy’ them, in the sense of feeling complete and conveying an emotional truth, even if they don’t always end happily. Our stories are more likely to fulfil their purpose if they follow some principles of great storytelling:

- All stories convey a simple human truth, of struggle to achieve an aim, or barriers overcome, in the face of increasing jeopardy. The way we choose to tell them determines how effectively that truth is conveyed.
- Great stories have a central protagonist with an aim to achieve, and the story is told from their perspective. In the best stories, we experience the world as them.
- Great stories push at the boundaries – switching perspectives, mixing up the timeline or adding twists and suspense. They keep audiences guessing how things will turn out.
- Great stories *show* rather than *tell* the audience what’s going on – revealing people’s character through their actions, and describing the systems at play through the effects of these systems on individuals.
- Great stories follow a template, often following a three-act paradigm.

In the first part, the protagonist is living their normal life, but something quickly happens that means their world is thrown off kilter – and they now have an aim to achieve.

In the middle part, the protagonist tries to achieve their aim, and is constantly thwarted.

In the final part, they prevail – though a late reversal in fortune often threatens everything. The conflict is resolved, the aim achieved, perhaps not in the way we or the protagonist expected, and safety and harmony are restored.

Using these established storytelling principles ensures the audience both cares about the protagonist, and wants them to succeed.

And these principles remind us that the stories we tell should not centre on NGOs and the great work they are doing. To our protagonists, we are a walk-on part in a far bigger story.



Key messages

So far, we’ve been making the case for great storytelling, and showing how – if we choose our stories thoughtfully, and tell the *same story* about the struggle for safety – we can build empathy and broaden support for our cause.

But we’re not just storytellers; we’re here to change things. This means we have to tell the unvarnished truth about the problem we exist to solve, why it matters, what we’re doing about it and – above all – what our audiences can do.

So, while we’ve argued that rational argument, with facts and stats, won’t work on their own, they do of course have a place in our communications. For this, we will need to align behind some key messages.

Message matrix

You can use the message matrix below to build messaging for your own campaign or appeal, based on the struggle for safety, or more generally to support your organisation’s public engagement. Don’t leave any part of it out – especially the part that sets out what people can do to help.

This message matrix is a tried-and-tested framework, based on four building blocks. As well as showing our key messages, it also has space to assemble your ‘proof points’ – the most compelling stories and the most succinct facts or statistics that help back up your case.

	Message	Proof points
The problem statement What’s the issue we exist to solve?	<i>A sentence or two about the struggle for safety, and why it’s relevant to your audience.</i>	Facts, statistics and real-life stories that help the struggle for safety feel real and relevant to your audience.
Relevance Why does it matter now?	<i>Something that explains why this matters now – a new threat or a new opportunity.</i>	Facts, statistics and real-life stories that increase the sense of urgency or relevance
Our solution What are we doing about it?	<i>A summary of what your organisation or sector is doing, and the progress you’ve made</i>	Facts, statistics and real-life stories that show the reach and impact of your work
The call to action What can our audiences do?	<i>A tangible and credible action that your audiences feel motivated to do, believing it will make a difference</i>	Proof points that reinforce the importance of acting now, or that provide ‘social proof’ of others carrying out the action

An example of a message matrix

Need an example? Here is a message matrix that you can use a blueprint for your communications, when you need to tell a story about the world – the struggle for safety – and then put yourselves and your audiences into that story.

	Message	Proof points
The problem statement What’s the issue we exist to solve?	<i>Around the world, ordinary people are having their lives torn apart by events far beyond their control. War, disaster or persecution – whatever the cause, the result is the same. All at once, families are pitched into a struggle for safety – one they know they may not survive. Those forced to flee their homes and countries have to show extraordinary resilience and determination if they are ever to find peace and a new life.</i>	Right now, over 26 million people have had to flee their home and country, because of conflict, disaster or persecution. Over 80% of them settle in a neighbouring country. More than four in 10 of displaced people are children (42%).
Relevance Why does it matter now?	<i>Our ability to provide a safe haven for the few that succeed in their struggle for safety is under threat as never before.</i> <i>A lack of safe routes to travel to the UK to seek asylum, and an ineffective and lengthy system for asylum applications, put people in more danger – at risk of exploitation, and death. It leaves families in limbo, often for years.</i> <i>Refugees and their families’ chances of finding a safe route away from violence, of being believed when they exercise their right to sanctuary, and of building new, peaceful lives in the UK are all shrinking – making it less likely they’ll ever feel safe again.</i> <i>There are very few safe ways for people seeking sanctuary to reach the UK, which is why so many make dangerous journeys across the channel.</i> <i>Our current government wants to criminalise those whose struggle for safety brings them through these routes. We want to protect the legal right to claim asylum and we know that much of the UK public are on our side.</i>	Under international law, anyone has the right to apply for asylum in any country that has signed the 1951 Refugee Convention, and to remain there until the authorities have assessed their claim. The 1951 Convention recognises that people fleeing persecution may have to use irregular means in order to escape and claim asylum in another country – there is no currently legal way to travel to the UK for the specific purpose of seeking asylum. The Convention guarantees everybody the right to apply for asylum. It has saved millions of lives. No country has ever withdrawn from it. Only 1% of all those forcibly displaced make their home in the UK. Around 30,000 people are currently stuck in the UK immigration system.

	Message	Proof points
Our solution What are we doing about it?	<i>Together, we are campaigning for more safe routes to sanctuary, and a quicker, more compassionate, and more efficient asylum system. In towns, cities and villages across the UK, we help refugees who have struggled against the odds to feel part of a community, replacing the sense of home and peace that was ripped from them.</i>	<p>We are calling for an approach that means:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• People can seek safety in the UK, no matter how they came here.• People can live in dignity while they wait to hear if they will be granted protection.• A kinder, fairer and more efficient system to decide whether people will be granted protection.• Refugees and their local communities can build better futures together, with proper support for local councils to do this.• The UK working with other countries to do our bit to help people who are forced to flee their homes.
The call to action What can our audiences do?	<i>It's in all our power to help refugees build a new life, in peace and security, with the opportunity to give back to the communities that welcome them.</i>	<p>Choose an appropriate call to action (see the ideas on p13):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stand together with refugees• Learn more about the facts• Help refugees in your community• Support refugees to build new lives• Strengthen charities' voice for change

Fifty words

Sometimes you only have a few words to communicate your message. You can use these as they are, or tailor them for your own organisation or campaign.

Ordinary families, forced to flee their homes, face a struggle for safety they may not survive. Right now, the journey is more dangerous than ever, and the odds are stacked against them. It's in our power to help them build a new, peaceful life for themselves, in communities that welcome them.



Over to you

A great story is like the baton handed over in a relay team – it's passed on, over and over again, going a distance that none of us can reach on our own.

The struggle for safety is a powerful story we should never stop sharing, if we are to mobilise those already onside, win over the 'mixed middle' and build mainstream support for our cause. This is how we will change how society thinks about and treats refugees, and establish new and compassionate policies that make them safe and give them a chance of a new life.

Let's do this together.



Appendix

Audience insight: literature review

Our literature review drew on a wide range of sources, in particular previous audience research into attitudes to refugees, immigration and asylum (and related issues) by:

- Britain Thinks
- British Future
- Equally Ours
- Freedom from Torture
- Global Dialogue
- Hope Not Hate
- IMIX
- Ipsos Mori
- More in Common
- Refugee Council
- Savanta ComRes
- Scottish Refugee Council
- UN High Commission on Refugees

Audience insight: primary research

Eden Stanley conducted 18 tele-depth video interviews during April 2021. We interviewed six respondents from each of three segments, defined by assimilating existing segmentation models found through the literature review:

- Aligned and active
- Aligned and inactive
- Persuadable ‘mixed middle’

We used two established models to structure the insights – Russell’s circumplex and Schwartz portrait values.

Project partners

This project was delivered by Eden Stanley, on behalf of a coalition of refugee and asylum sector organisations convened by IMIX and the Asylum Reform Initiative

Thank you to everyone who attended the workshops held by IMIX to help develop this narrative:

- Action Foundation
- British Future
- British Red Cross
- Care4Calais
- City of Sanctuary
- Community Reporters
- Choose Love
- Freedom From Torture
- Hummingbird Project
- JCWI
- KRAN

- One Strong Voice
- Naccom
- Rainbow Migration
- Refugee Action
- Refugee Council
- Reset
- Safe Passage
- St Paul de Vincent Society
- Scottish Refugee Council
- Sisters Not Strangers
- Solidarity with Refugees
- Women for Refugee Women
- World Jewish Relief





IMIX is changing the conversation about migration and refugees, challenging an often hostile media agenda and altering public perception. We work with partners across the refugee and migration sector to put the case for an open and welcoming Britain.

IMIX facilitates and coordinates communication on migrant, refugee and integration issues. We work closely with partner organisations to support them to achieve their aims by offering mentoring, training and consultancy to meet their specific needs – and to help them reach as wide an audience as possible. Our communications expertise is offered free to organisations of all sizes working on migration, refugee protection and integration in the UK.

To find out more:

Visit our website www.imix.org.uk

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Instagram [@human_journeys](https://www.instagram.com/human_journeys)

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