



# SAFE ROUTES

## A MESSAGING GUIDE

Image credit: David McKelvey via Creative Commons

### Why this guide?

After 27 people drowned in the Channel in November 2021, it became apparent that public knowledge of safe routes (or the lack of them) was hugely limited. In 2022, Channel crossings increased further, and the government responded by threatening to deport those who crossed irregularly rather than introducing any safe routes. Better public awareness about the lack of options available to people seeking safety is therefore urgently needed.

### Methodology

This messaging is based on in-depth workshops held in June and July 2022 with policy and communications specialists from the refugee sector and people with lived experience of crossing the Channel. It was then tested by More In Common with two focus groups of 'Loyal National' swing voters based in the Red Wall constituencies of Wolverhampton and Middlesbrough. It also draws on existing messaging guides such as Freedom from Torture's *Changing the Conversation* (2021) and IMIX's *Struggle for Safety* (2021).

## Message 1: A plan vs chaos

When people escape dangerous situations, we want to make sure they feel safe as soon as possible. They have lost everything, and they need help to start a new life. But there is no refugee visa, and the reality is, if your house is bombed, you may not have time to apply for one anyway. Rather than responding in a panic to the latest crisis, this government could create a safe, organised route which would allow us to help such families directly.

### Why this message?

Refugees participating in our workshop described how they couldn't turn back, because that would mean death, but how helpless they felt when they put their lives in the hands of smugglers as well. The Red Wall swing voters in our focus group were clear that people crossing the Channel were desperate, but did not always seem aware that there was no refugee visa. They emphasised the benefits of an organised plan compared to the current chaos.

*If I had that time back again and I had the option of crossing the Channel in a little dinghy I would do it, definitely. Because it's not dangerous compared to what you've been through... In my case I would do everything rather than go back home because you'd be killed 100% – workshop participant*

*Rather than everyone rushing around like headless chickens, as soon as there's a crisis somewhere, thinking about how we're going to do it and what we're going to do, if there's a policy in place, strict guideline rules... we can respond faster, be more proactive and probably get a better outcome out of the whole thing – focus group participant*

*If there is a safe route and they can make the application themselves and come over, there's no need for a smuggler anymore – focus group participant*

### Real-life examples

- The number of Afghans resettled vs those eligible
- Countries with wars or human rights abuses but no resettlement scheme such as Yemen, Iran and Eritrea
- The fall of Kabul or Ukraine where events changed overnight
- Countries where there are no visa application centres such as Afghanistan

## Message 2: Participating from day one

If someone currently in danger wants to come here, work hard and participate in the community, we should give them a chance. But this government has allowed a bureaucratic backlog to build up which means skilled people are forced to sit on their hands for years before getting permission to work. If we invested in a speedier system which could identify refugees when they first need our help, bring them here safely and give them the right to work straight away, they wouldn't have to risk their lives in a small boat and instead could start participating in the community straight away.

### Why this message?

Refugees participating in our workshop described their frustration about spending years in the asylum system when they could have been working or studying. The Red Wall swing voters in our focus group were anxious about the cost to the taxpayer of accommodating refugees but repeatedly emphasised that they would feel differently if refugees were filling empty jobs or contributing their skills. They did not draw a clear distinction between refugees and migrants but were concerned about the risk that criminals would take advantage of the scheme if there was not proper vetting.

 *There is quite a lot of spare work in the country and if people are willing to come here and work, I don't think anybody would have a problem with that at all... In fact, if we were to legalise it, just allow people to come, people wouldn't have to come across the Channel in a small boat and we could control it ourselves – **focus group participant***

*My expectation before I came here was that in six months I'd be settled and able to start my life but it took me one and a half years, I spent it in a hotel doing nothing... The expectation should be a fast process, access to education, having the right to work. Many people wouldn't stay in Home Office accommodation or rely on benefits, they will find a job and have their own place – I was trying to do that for one and a half years, [but] I couldn't – **workshop participant***

### Real-life examples

- The current labour shortage and the impact this is having on critical services
- Asylum seekers with key skills who are stuck in the system and unable to work
- Success stories from refugees who were allowed to work such as resettled Ukrainians, Afghans and Syrians
- Examples of the volunteering roles asylum seekers took up during the Covid pandemic

## Message 3: A vision of hope

There's nothing more important than people's lives. But currently, the only way for most refugees to ask for our help is to get into a flimsy dinghy to cross the world's busiest shipping lane. If we worked together with other countries, we could create a system which allows people with a good reason to come here to apply for our help. Then the refugees we welcome could take a normal flight like everybody else. Rather than letting the mess and despair continue, we could create a route of hope.

### Why this message?

The Red Wall swing voters in our focus group referred repeatedly to the fact people's lives were at risk and described the images of the Channel crossings as 'sad' and 'raw'. They described a safe route as a vision of 'hope' involving a plane (and the usual airport processes) with people waiting to welcome the refugees when they arrive. They were not generally aware of how many refugees the UK takes in compared to France, but repeatedly shared concerns that the UK could not take everyone who wanted to come. The refugee participants in our workshop emphasised specific reasons to come to the UK like family ties, while pointing out countries like Germany took many more refugees.

 *The primary [reason] should always be people's lives, and the fact that they wanted to risk their lives to come over. Of course it's not good these people are making money from illegally getting people over here, but I don't think that's the main issue at all – **focus group participant***

*The positive thing is that the UK government did bring some people through a resettlement visa. Because they had a visa they could go to school, start work, there was less pressure and they could contribute to society – **workshop participant***

*A plane landing rather than a dinghy, a nice plane, people waiting with open arms – **focus group participant***

### Real-life examples

- Positive stories of Ukrainians, Syrians and Afghans who have been welcomed to the UK
- Positive stories of the communities who decide to welcome them and why
- Historic examples of refugees who have come to the UK through safe routes and become part of the fabric of their communities

## Less successful messages

The concept of safe routes was virtually unknown to the Red Wall swing voter focus groups. While almost everyone endorsed the concept of allowing people to apply for refugee status outside the UK, and those who were successful to come here safely, the response to existing safe routes was more mixed.

### Homes for Ukraine

Although the Homes for Ukraine scheme was an obvious model, using it as a launch pad to talk about wider safe routes proved a little challenging. Some Red Wall focus group participants were aware of positive stories involving Ukrainian refugees, but others referred to its flaws. One participant questioned whether the scheme should be expanded to other refugees when there might still be Ukrainians who needed help, while conversely, another participant thought it was unfair that it was only for Ukrainians.

One possible solution would be to emphasise the positive stories of Ukrainians rebuilding their lives while not necessarily endorsing the details of the scheme itself.

### Family reunion

Workshop participants regularly mentioned family as an important reason to come to the UK, but focus group participants saw family reunion as something that could be exploited, questioning whether family members would also be screened, and whether people would be allowed to sponsor distant relatives as well as the nuclear family.

If the message of family reunion was combined with one about a clear screening process or an emotional example of what it means to one family, it might be more effective. This is a pressing issue for many families, so should be explored further.

### Women and children

Both the Syrian resettlement scheme and Homes for Ukraine emphasised protecting women and children, and safe routes would undoubtedly benefit this group most, but interestingly focus group participants did not think that there should be positive discrimination. Rather, they thought any safe route should treat applicants equally and assess them in terms of the immediate danger they were in.

### Nationalities

IMIX's previous research, *The Struggle for Safety*, found personal stories of individuals had the most impact in changing minds, and the workshop messaging included references to Afghan and Syrian resettlement schemes. However, apart from Ukraine, Red Wall participants did not engage with references to foreign affairs. The focus groups were held when headlines were beginning to turn to Albanians, but this nationality was not discussed at length either. Participants seemed to accept that people taking small boats were desperate and their main concern was that criminals were slipping in as well.

## Difficult questions

The questions which broadcasters frequently ask were notably different to those prioritised by both workshop and focus group participants. The following suggested messaging is intended to be used as a way to acknowledge the question and return to the key messages.

### **Isn't France a safe country?**

Would you feel safe in France if you had no family and friends and nowhere to sleep? Just as the authorities make the border welcoming for tourists, they deliberately make it a hostile environment for refugees. We're talking about very specific people trying to get as far away as possible from a nightmare and to a place they have a support network, can speak the language and have a chance to rebuild their life.

### **Aren't we just encouraging smugglers?**

No one gets into a flimsy dinghy to cross the world's busiest shipping lane unless it's their only hope. We know that many of the people crossing the Channel come from countries with brutal regimes like Afghanistan, Iran and Syria. There is no refugee visa they can apply for – the only way for them to ask for our help is to turn to ruthless individuals who will take them on a dangerous journey. If this government really wanted to stop smugglers, it should create safe routes for those who need them.

### **Can we really take any more when the asylum system is in crisis?**

It's in everyone's interests that the current chaos is addressed. But this is a crisis of this government's own making. It needs to deal with the backlog in asylum cases and create a system where refugees do not have to make dangerous journeys and wait in limbo, but instead can feel safe and start participating in the community from day one.

## **The messaging in context**

Although the call for safe routes has become a rallying cry in response to dangerous journeys and the government closing down existing options, many organisations have rightly pointed out that safe routes alone will never provide a humanitarian framework for all refugees. Nor are all organisations united on the details of what safe routes look like.

However, talking about safe routes remains a useful entry point into a wider discussion about refugee protection. Not only does it raise awareness of how few people seeking safety currently have access to a safe route, but it resets the conversation by asking the public to engage with the value of protecting human lives, rather than responding to dogwhistle politics.

This messaging tries to reflect both these facts by focusing on principles rather than specific policies. It is designed to support positive calls for safe routes while acknowledging the valid claims of those forced to make dangerous journeys to find safety.

The messaging also connects safe routes with a second campaign – the right to work. Some organisations may feel uncomfortable with such a connection. However, those opposing more safe routes cite the lack of resources to accommodate more refugees, while the fact asylum seekers are banned from working is poorly understood. Several of our lived experience participants expressed their frustration at being unable to work and pay their own rent in accommodation of their choosing. Once again, the messaging is not designed to proscribe, but instead reset the conversation and set the parameters for a new debate.

# **With Thanks to**

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