

**CHANGING THE
CONVERSATION ON ASYLUM:
A MESSAGING GUIDE**



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This messaging guide was produced by Ellie Mae O'Hagan with Freedom from Torture. Ellie Mae O'Hagan is a fellow of the Global Messaging Programme run by NEON, Australian Progress and Anat Shenker-Osorio.

INTRODUCTION

It was the 2005 Champions League final. Liverpool F.C. was playing A.C. Milan, and the former was 3-nil down at half time. Liverpool had talented players and a lot of support, but faced with a stronger, more aggressive Opponent, it was faltering. Fans were looking on, demoralised - and some were starting to leave the stadium.

If we were to use an analogy to describe where the migrant and refugee advocacy sector was in 2021, it might be Liverpool, halfway through that important match. We're falling behind, the Opposition is gaining ground and our base is losing hope. But there's a crucial second act to Liverpool's story: the team went on to score three goals in the remaining half, and then it won the game.

It's less unusual than you might think for a team to beat a stronger Opponent. It often happens when the so-called underdog is tactically smart, takes advantage of all the Opportunities it has, and approaches the game with an insurgent mindset. The same is true for campaigns. History is dotted with examples of the smaller side winning, and transforming society as a result.

This messaging guide is a tool to help the refugee and migrant advocacy sector to think tactically, play to our strengths and win. We'll look at the current communication problems facing the sector, and the methodology and messages that can help us carve out a new approach that will be successful in persuading the public.

OUR CURRENT COMMUNICATIONS

As part of our research, we looked at the media and communications output of 10 migrant and refugee advocacy organisations in the UK, concentrating mainly on media releases and campaign literature but also examining some broadcast appearances of senior figures in those organisations.

Here we outline the challenges facing the UK's migration sector in terms of how it is currently communicating on refugee issues.

PATIENT DIAGNOSTICS

Much of the sector is caught up in what we are calling “patient diagnostics.” Here is a typical example of what we mean by this:

Auditors found evidence of nearly one thousand people seeking asylum left in initial accommodation – which typically involves people having to share rooms with little access to money, healthcare and toiletries – for almost three months. The Home Office’s own guidelines says stays should be no more than 35 days.

This emotionless, procedural language, which reads like a doctor advising the patient of his symptoms, was the most common form of communications we came across. Given that much of the UK’s migrants rights advocacy involves bringing legal challenges to protect individuals or change legislation, it is understandable that this has seeped into communications.

But there is overwhelming evidence that this kind of communication does not work. It assumes that people act as “fact-processing machines” who digest information rationally and weigh up the pros and cons. But as psychologist Daniel Kahneman outlines in his bestseller, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, most people - particularly those who are not especially engaged in the issue - actually absorb our communications passively, and this means that they tend to tap into their emotions and existing ways of understanding the world in order to make judgements.

The problem with “patient diagnostics” communications is that it doesn’t activate any emotions or appeal to any existing ways of understanding, meaning that it tends to go in one ear and out of the other - leaving our audience vulnerable to the messages of the Opposition, which do tap into emotions and existing ways of understanding the world.

PASSIVE COMMUNICATION

The sector's messaging rarely explains who is responsible for the poor treatment of refugees and what their motivations might be. Instead we describe the mistreatment of refugees as experiences that are just happening. We talk about refugees living in poverty, or being housed in barracks - but we rarely explain why refugees are impoverished and who is forcing them to live in barracks.

Sometimes we talk about the asylum system as though it is a separate entity to us altogether - perhaps a monster with its own whims and moods. We describe the asylum system as "lurching into crisis," or "unfeeling" or "cruel." But the asylum system isn't any of those things - it is a collection of buildings and bureaucracies. It is the people who have created the system that are responsible for how it works, and those people could create a different system if they wanted to.

Passive communications is the equivalent of having someone empty a bucket of cold water over our heads and declaring that it's raining. It is transforming events and institutions that are designed by human beings into naturally-occurring phenomena that cannot be explained or changed.

This is important because the majority of our audience is already cynical, and have few ways of imagining how change might happen. If we don't explain who is responsible for the current situation and how it can change, our communications become nothing more than a list of bad things that have happened, which will demotivate and demoralise our audience, and elide the possibility of things being better.

NEGATION

Communicators in our sector often evoke criticisms of refugees in order to negate them. The most common example of this is probably the phrase, “no human being is illegal.” This is used across the sector in various different forms - like “it is not illegal to claim asylum,” and so on. Research shows that words like “asylum” and “illegal” are more vivid than words like “no” or “not,” and as time goes on, people tend to forget the latter and just remember that they’ve heard something about “asylum” and “illegal.” Research by the University of Edinburgh found that if you evoke unhelpful frames, even in order to negate them, you give those phrases more power and they loom larger in the public consciousness.

We don’t talk enough about who refugees are (as opposed to what they are not), and what kind of asylum system we want to create. This diminishes the ability of our audience to support our demands, because we don’t offer them a vision of what we are for.

MORALITY

It is welcome that many migrants rights organisations attempt to tap into moral frames when discussing the treatment of migrants and refugees. Unfortunately the way this usually occurs is by inserting words like “immoral” and “inhumane” in the middle of “patient diagnostics” communications. Not only that, the morality frame is often diluted by an “efficiency” frame. Campaigners argue that the current process is “inefficient” or “wastes talent.” There is no need to do this, and when morality is used - which it should be - it should characterise the entire message, not be tacked on at the end. Our audience is not stupid, and they can tell when a concept is being shoehorned into a message. But also, our audience wants to do the right thing and also think of themselves as the kind of people who do the right thing. It is effective to appeal to them on this basis, and it should be done fully and without tentativeness.

PITY THE REFUGEE

In this sector, our communications often evoke pity for refugees and asylum seekers. The word “vulnerable” is very common, as is descriptions of people “languishing” in detention centres. All of this can be effective, in the sense that people may take pity on migrants and refugees if they are presented with desperate images of them suffering. But it does not give campaigners what they ultimately want, which is for people to view refugees and migrants as equals.

Campaigners should refrain from using graphic and lurid descriptions to talk about the experiences of refugees at the hands of immigration systems. It is tempting as campaigners to talk about sexual abuse, poor toilet facilities and gratuitous mistreatment, because we find it so appalling. But for most people listening, this underlines the idea that the people being talked about aren’t like them, that they don’t have basic human dignity and that their life experiences are so far removed from ours that we have nothing in common. This transforms refugees from fellow human beings we should support into burdens we must shoulder. Research in other countries have found that people are less likely to welcome torture survivors into their communities, out of fear that they might be emotionally unstable.

Communications that evoke pity may bring about short term wins, like donations for a one-off campaign, but they erode the idea that refugees and our audience are equals, united by our shared humanity and deserving of respect.

THE METHODOLOGY

As campaigners, our task is to **energise the base, persuade the persuadables, and alienate the Opposition.** Here we break down how each component part of that task works.

ENERGISE THE BASE

Don't preach to the choir, mobilise it.

Our base are the people who fundamentally agree with us, who are likely to always agree with us, and who are resistant to the messages of the Opposition. It is a mistake to view this group as “in the bag,” and therefore not worth appealing to. This is not because they might drift into the arms of the Opposition, but because if we energise them with effective messages, they will become ambassadors for our cause. If we give one person in a household the tools to speak simply and persuasively, we give them the power to convince everyone in that household.

Our base is the best platform we will ever have. They enjoy the trust of the persuadables (see below) more than any media outlet, politician or campaign. **We all know how much more likely we are to try a new restaurant or buy a product if a friend recommends it - and it's the same principle here.**

Inspiring the base to spread our words is how we win. As Anat Shenker-Osorio says, if our words don't spread, they don't work.

PERSUADE THE PERSUADABLES

On most issues, persuadables comprise the vast majority of the population. This group doesn't have strongly-held political opinions and its members tend to know less about the issue at hand. Bluntly, they don't really know whether they support refugee rights or not.

The persuadables are sometimes referred to as the "middle." We don't call them that because it implies that they have fixed opinions at the midpoint of two extremes. In fact, the main feature of the persuadables is that their opinions change all the time because they don't know what they think. Rather than being moderates or centrists in the traditional sense of the words, they can oscillate from one end of the argument to the other. They are drawn to clarity and decisiveness, whether it comes from a progressive or reactionary direction. In other words - they are persuadable!

ALIENATE THE OPPOSITION

The idea that you should try to actively alienate some people can be troubling to campaigners whose job it is to persuade others. So it is useful to understand what we mean by “Opposition.”

The Opposition is not a particular newspaper or political party. It is the relatively small section of the population (often around 10 or 15%, depending on the issue and country) that actively opposes what we stand for on ideological or values-driven grounds. In the UK, our research found that the Opposition believes that border guards should be able to shoot at boats arriving on British shores, and that children should be returned to countries where they might be killed.

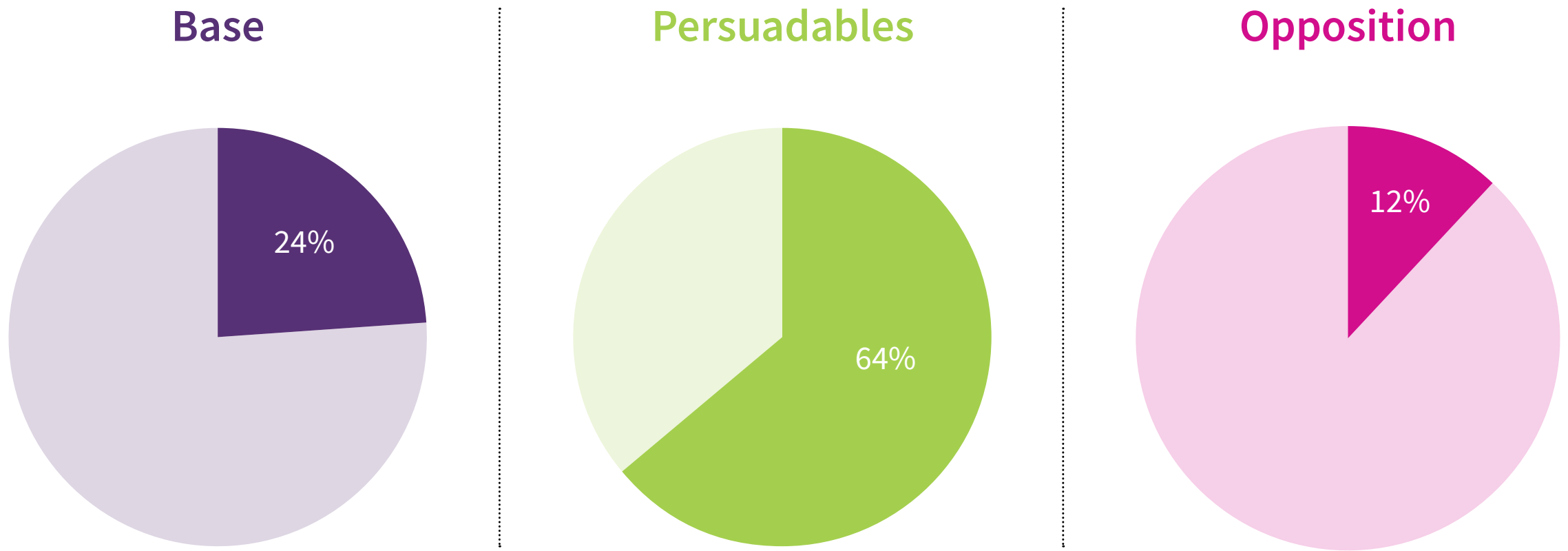
People in the Opposition have extreme views on refugees which they put time into developing. Like our base, they attempt to convince others of their ideas, and they are sure of what they think. They must be distinguished from persuadables who are liable to repeat both anti and pro-refugee statements.

We need to alienate the Opposition, because they have made up their minds and can’t be persuaded. If we try to create communications that do not alienate them, we risk producing messages that are so bland that they don’t say anything, or that end up moving the persuadable group in the direction of the Opposition. We will see in the next section how some of our current communications are already doing that.

WHAT WE FOUND OUT

SEGMENTING THE AUDIENCE

We used a 2,000 general population sample. We segmented our sample by asking them a series of questions where they had to choose between two answers. One answer was a Base answer and one was an Opposition answer. Participants who chose all of the Base answers were segmented into Base, those who chose all of the Opposition answers were segmented into the Opposition, and those who chose a mixture of the two were segmented into Persuadables.



WHAT WE FOUND OUT

Even though we segmented our audience attitudinally, we can share some information about them demographically. But remember, it was their views that determined how they were segmented, not their demographic information.

BASE

- More likely to be female
- More likely to be aged 35-54
- More likely to live in Scotland (UK wide)
- More likely to live in the North East (England only)
- More likely to be interested in current affairs

PERSUADABLES

- Equally likely to be male or female
- More likely to be aged 18-34
- More likely to live in London
- Less likely to be interested in current affairs

OPPOSITION

- More likely to be male
- More likely to be aged 55 and over
- More likely to live in N. Ireland (UK wide)
- More likely to live in the East and West Midlands (England only)
- More likely to be interested in current affairs

QUESTIONS FOR OUR AUDIENCE

During the segmentation process, we were able to ask questions that give us some communications insights.

SAFE AND LEGAL ROUTES

When talking about the UK's refugee policies, politicians and campaigners sometimes use the phrase “safe and legal routes.”

Which definition of this phrase do you identify with the most?

49% Safe and legal routes means we must police our country's borders so that only people with the correct documentation can arrive in our country.

51% Safe and legal routes mean we must provide ways for people who are fleeing danger to arrive in our country safely.

“**Safe and legal routes**” could reasonably be described as the catchphrase of the refugee and migration sector. When a new policy has been announced or refugee rights has made headlines, campaigners will often appear on the news making this demand.

However our research shows that when we used this phrase, nearly half of our audience understands it as a call to police our countries borders to prevent undocumented people from arriving in Britain. What this means is that the phrase has no strategic value: when we use it we are simply tossing a coin and hoping that our audience is hearing what we want them to hear. Perhaps this is why Priti Patel is also happy to use this phrase.

THE NATION AS A FRAME

We're aware that some communicators in our sector are interested in using "Britain" or "the nation" as a lens through which to talk about refugees. We wanted to test this.

Which statement do you most agree with?

51% Genuine refugees must seek asylum in other countries, not break the law by coming to Britain illegally.

49% As British people, we should do the right thing and treat people who are fleeing danger with compassion.

Which statement do you most agree with?

47% Genuine refugees must seek asylum in other countries, not break the law by coming to Britain illegally.

53% As caring people, we should do the right thing and treat people who are fleeing danger with compassion.

We're aware that some communicators in our sector are interested in using "Britain" or "the nation" as a lens through which to talk about refugees. We wanted to test this.

In these questions, we have summarised our message into one line: "we should do the right thing and treat people who are fleeing danger with compassion." Then we have summarised the Opposition's message into one line: "Genuine refugees must seek asylum in other countries, not break the law by coming to Britain illegally." In example one, we have prefaced our message with the phrase "As British people," whereas in example two we prefaced our message with the phrase "as caring people."

As you can see, when we apply the "British" lens, the Opposition's message is slightly ahead. But when we apply the "caring" lens, our message wins with a 6 point difference.

When you evoke the nation, your audience will involuntarily think of all the things that are associated with the idea of nation - like borders, an in-group and an out-group - and perhaps in the case of the UK, English speaking and having white skin. This means the lens you are choosing automatically reminds your audience of all the things that makes refugees different to them.

But when you evoke the idea of caring, you remind people of our shared humanity and of compassion. You also appeal to their desire to see themselves as caring people, and to be seen that way by others.

US VS. THE OPPOSITION

In this question we distilled our current message into two sentences and did the same with the Opposition message. Then we pitted them against one another. As you can see, the Opposition message overwhelmingly beats our current message, suggesting an urgent change to our communications is needed.

Which statement do you most agree with?

42% It is nearly impossible to claim asylum in the UK without resorting to dangerous journeys. There is an urgent need for the Home Office to create safe and legal routes to the UK for desperate people fleeing war, torture and persecution.

58% Genuine refugees who have arrived in countries like France should claim asylum there, not risk their lives and break the law by coming to the UK.

THE HOME OFFICE

Which government department deals with asylum applications?

We're aware that many organisations in our sector call out the Home Office. But while those of us who work on refugee rights are aware of the bad behaviour of the Home Office, it's also true that the general public's knowledge of government departments is very limited. So we wanted to understand people's familiarity with the Home Office.

As you can see, just under half of our audience do not know that it is the Home Office which processes asylum applications. We also asked the audience this question not long *after* they had been exposed to a message that explicitly mentioned the Home Office in relation to claiming asylum (see the next section for all the messages we tested).

51% Correct

.....
49% Wrong answer / don't know

This means mentioning the Home Office puts us back into the situation where we are tossing a coin and hoping that the person hearing our message understands it, with no guarantee that they will. By talking about the Home Office instead of *this government*, we place an unnecessary barrier to understanding in front of half of our audience. Note, too, that we say *this government* and not *the government* - we don't want our audience to oppose the principle of government in and of itself, we want them to recognise that the actions of this particular government are wrong.

DIAL TESTED MESSAGES

To test out new ways of talking about refugee rights, we dial tested four messages. This means we played each message as an audio clip to our participants and they used the arrow keys on their computer to dial up (meaning they felt warm towards the message they were hearing) or down (meaning they felt cold). We ensured none of the messages were longer than around 30 seconds, so participants would be reacting instinctively, not intellectually, to what they were hearing.

The graphs we share here show the audience's real-time responses to the messages.

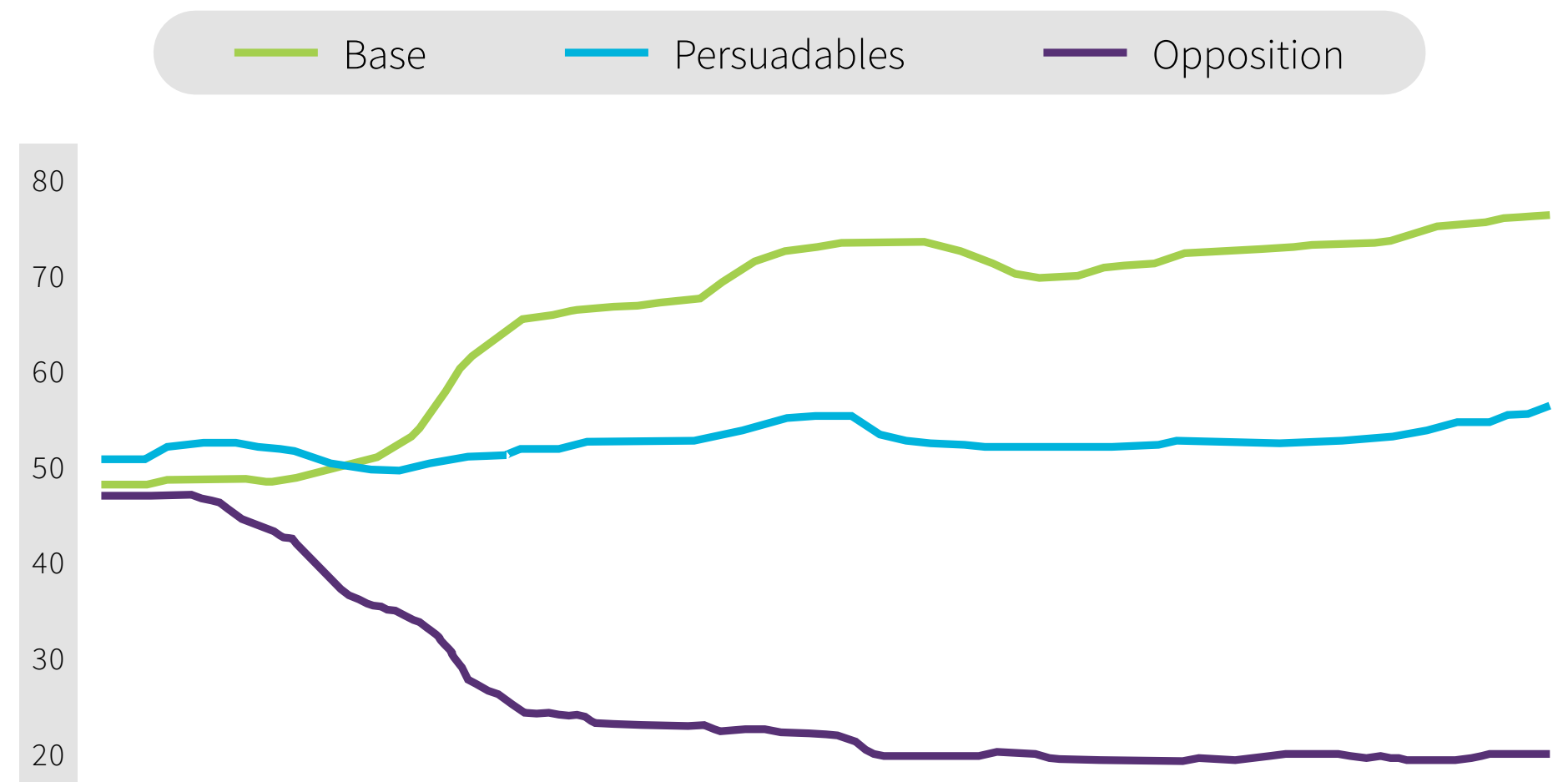
MESSAGES TO AVOID

STATUS QUO MESSAGE

This message is a composite of the communications of different organisations across the sector.

It is nearly impossible to claim asylum in the UK without resorting to dangerous journeys. There is an urgent need for the Home Office to create safe and legal routes to the UK for desperate people fleeing war, torture and persecution. People seeking safety in the UK should be met with compassion, not hostility. The UK has space. We only take 0.26% of the world's refugees. It's perfectly legal to enter a country irregularly if you are seeking asylum. As a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the UK has a duty to provide protection to those who need it and treat everyone with dignity while they are in our country.

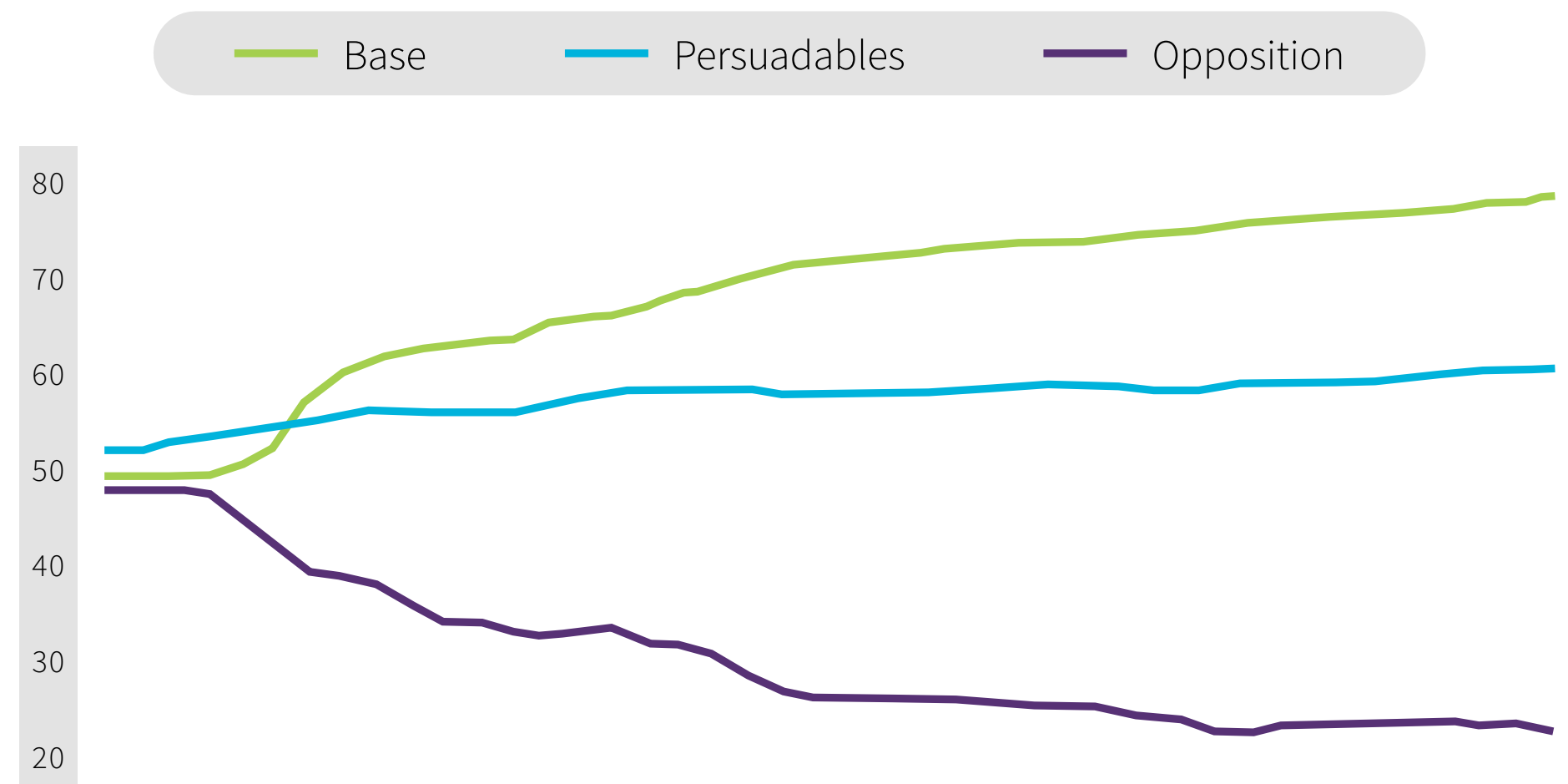
- The base loves it.
- The Opposition hates it.
- It has no significant effect on the persuadables.
- The most unpopular phrase with the persuadables is “There is an urgent need for the Home Office to create safe and legal routes.”
- The sentence “We only take 0.26% of the world’s refugees” seems to create a small spike. Beware that the audience may approve of this message because it frames taking refugees as a burden and then points out that we take very few.



NATIONAL PRIDE MESSAGE

How we treat refugees is about who we are as a country. Britain is one of the richest countries in the world, and most British people believe in giving others a helping hand. We should set an example to the world, welcoming those who need sanctuary. Our asylum system should set the gold standard; reflecting our values of compassion and justice by processing all those who arrive on our shores as quickly and fairly as possible and ensuring those who need our help are able to rebuild their lives in safety and become part of our British communities.

- The base loves it.
- The Opposition hates it.
- Persuadables are moderately warm towards this message.
- Everyone likes the phrase “how we treat refugees is about who we are.”
- The base dials up at the phrase “part of our British communities.”

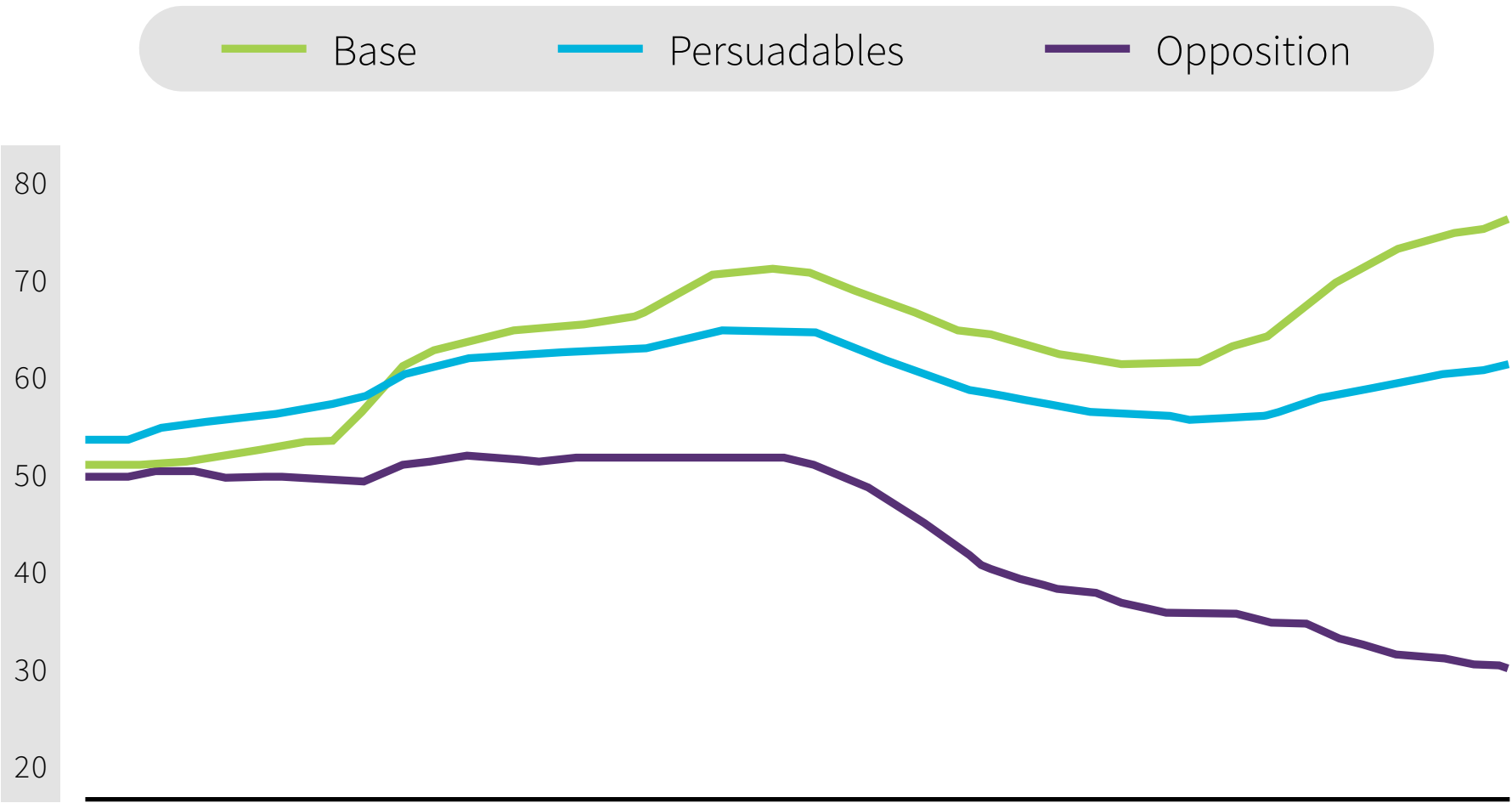


MESSAGES THAT TEST WELL

GOLDEN RULE MESSAGE

No matter what we look like or where we come from, most of us strive to treat others the way we'd want to be treated. If any one of us feared for our lives or for our loved ones, we'd want to know that others would help us to safety. But certain politicians are trying to turn us against people who come seeking safety, hoping we'll look the other way while they endanger families who have been forced to flee their homes. We won't fall for that. It's time to create a fair and effective asylum process for everyone, and to support people to rebuild their lives in our communities.

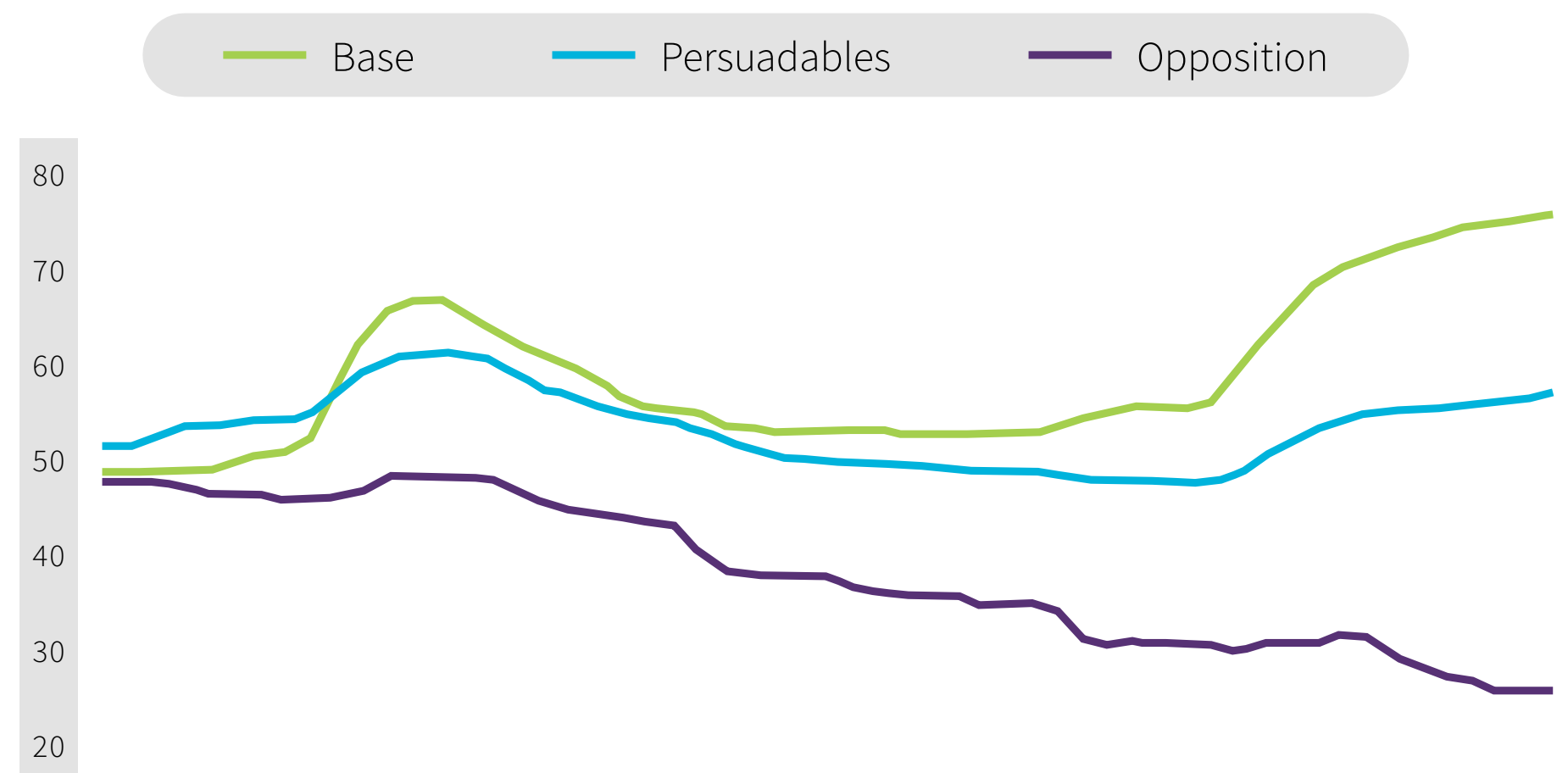
- The base loves it.
- The Opposition hates it.
- There are more significant highs for the persuadables.
- Everyone likes the phrase “But certain politicians are trying to turn us against people who come seeking safety.”
- Note at “support people to rebuild their lives in our communities,” the base and persuadables dial up and the Opposition dials down. This shows us that this is a progressive message, because it unites the people we want to unite and alienates the people we want to alienate. This is a message that is saying something and gets people to where we want them to be.



RACE-CLASS MESSAGE

Whatever our background or postcode, religion or race, we all deserve to live peacefully and free from harm. But today, a small group of politicians and their greedy friends hurt all of our families by taking money out of our communities, running the NHS into the ground, and denying us fair pay for our work – all while pocketing the profits. They will do anything to distract us from their failures, encouraging us to blame refugees and migrants when things go wrong. While they do not care about us, we must show that we do care about one another. We need to come together to demand a fair and efficient asylum system that allows those who need sanctuary to safely rebuild their lives as part of our communities.

- The base loves it
- The Opposition hates it
- There are more significant highs for the persuadables than any other message
- The base and persuadables sharply dial up at “But today, a small group of politicians and their greedy friends hurt all of our families.”
- The base and persuadables sharply dial up again at “While they do not care about us, we must show that we do care about one another.”
- Again at “support people to rebuild their lives in our communities,” the base and persuadables dial up and the Opposition dials down.



RECOMMENDATIONS

MESSAGE FORMAT

1. Lead with a shared value
2. Explain what and who is getting in the way of the value being realised.
3. Assert a proactive solution

MESSAGING PRINCIPLES

1. **Lead with the value of care and compassion.** All too often we open our message by talking about problems, which can often alienate our audience - who often already have quite a lot of problems in their own lives and don't need to hear about more. Instead we should lead with a shared value, which reminds us of what we have in common. We recommend leading with care and compassion as this did very well in our testing.
2. **Don't try to elicit pity for refugees.** By centering refugees' distressing experiences, we tell our audience that refugees have little in common with those of us already living in the UK. We may also make it less likely that people would support refugees settling in their communities, fearing that their experiences of trauma might have made them emotionally unstable - and therefore a burden. It's also important to note that refugees themselves do not like being talked about in this way.

3. **Don't frame the debate around legality.** One of the problems with the phrase “safe and legal routes” is that it encourages us to think of refugees in terms of whether they acted legally or illegally in travelling to the UK. When we frame the debate in this way, we move it away from a question of doing the right thing and showing compassion, and towards the issue of lawbreaking. We know from previous research that evoking lawbreaking, even in order to say it is not happening, inhibits people's ability to feel compassion towards refugees. It's also the case that if we encourage people to approve of refugees who only come here via legal routes, we risk losing public support if the government makes those routes illegal.
4. **Point the finger at those responsible.** In order for people to believe that things can change, we need to make it clear that what is happening now is a choice made by people. We also need to explain why refugees are demonised, because if we don't, our audience might look for explanations from the Opposition for why refugees are depicted so negatively in public discourse.
5. **Be comfortable with alienating the Opposition.** We know this is outside of campaigners' comfort zones, but alienating the small section of the population with extreme Opposition to refugees is how we ensure that our messages say something that is both substantial and progressive.
6. **Create something good.** Instead of talking about fixing a broken system, we need to talk about what we can build when we come together. Positive, future-focused messaging is what ensures our audience remains engaged and optimistic about the possibility for change.

DON'T SAY / DO SAY

DON'T SAY	DO SAY
Home Office	This government
Safe and legal routes	Safe routes
As British people	As caring people
Resettle	Safely rebuild their lives as part of our communities
People have been detained	This government has detained people
Fix the system, reform asylum policy	Create a fair and efficient asylum system
Graphic descriptions of torture, murder, sexual abuse	Put in harm's way, denied basic rights
Vulnerable people	People seeking safety
It is not illegal to claim asylum	Supporting people who need help is the right thing to do
No human being is illegal	Wherever we come from, we all have a right to feel safe

WORDS THAT WORK

- ✓ How we treat refugees is about who we are
- ✓ Whoever we are and wherever we come from, most strive to treat others how we want to be treated
OR we all deserve to live peacefully and free from harm
- ✓ Certain politicians are trying to turn us against people who come seeking safety
- ✓ While they do not care about us, we must show that we do care about one another
- ✓ Support people to rebuild their lives in our communities
- ✓ Create a fair and efficient asylum system

To find out more about the work of Freedom from Torture, go to www.freedomfromtorture.org,
or about our research and to and stay involved, email campaigns@freedomfromtorture.org