



TALKING MIGRATION: A MESSAGING GUIDE FOR LOCAL COUNCILLORS

Narratives around people who move are toxic, and have been for decades. The media and certain politicians consistently scapegoat and demonise migrants of all kinds.

Local councillors can play a key role in pushing back against these divisive narratives. They know that, in reality, communities are not as divided as some would have us think.

Local authorities have a Public Sector Equality Duty to 'foster good relations' between differing groups of people – local councillors can be part of this, including by speaking out in local and national media.

What's more, research shows that local councillors are trusted messengers (much more so than Westminster politicians) – so speaking out confidently in support of migrant residents can be really powerful.

That's why we've put together this messaging guide – it covers some of the broad principles you should stick to when talking in the media (and on social media) about migration, whether in your local community or nationally. Hopefully this will help you feel a bit more confident when approaching what can feel like a tricky topic.

If you'd like to do more work with the media (from things like giving comments to the local paper or writing your own op-eds to speaking out in national broadcast media), get in touch with the Migrant Champions Network, and we'll be happy to offer you some more support.

SHARED VALUES ARE EVERYTHING

Our shared values and common humanity are what it's all about. In the fog of toxic media narratives, it can be so easy to lose sight of the things we all cherish: safety, security, hope for the future, the ability to be with the people we love.

The conversation about migration can get very detailed, with questions about the practicalities of certain specific policies. But at the heart of it all, we need to remember what we're asking for: people's right to live a good, fulfilling life regardless of skin colour or where we were born.

One helpful tool is to make these values concrete by making the listener or reader think about their own lives, and their connection to this shared value. So saying something like 'if you or I were [in a certain situation],' or 'if one of my loved ones were...'

Bringing it back to the shared value is a great way to make people feel united, in the face of the things that divide us. Naming things like race and class, but then bringing it back to the values we all share, can really help to drive home the point that these values are universal, and that we have more in common than that which divides us.

Using phrases like ‘most people believe’ can be really helpful here, as it encourages the listener or reader to join the community of good-hearted people that you’re invoking.

EXAMPLE

We all deserve safety and a place to call home, no matter where we’re from or the colour of our skin.

If you or I were in danger, we’d want to be able to seek safety without risking our lives, and be treated with respect and dignity when we arrived.

ACKNOWLEDGE - BRIDGE - COMMUNICATE

The fact is, there are lots of bad things happening in the world, and people are facing a lot of challenges – if you just followed the suggestion above of advancing a positive vision without acknowledging this, you run the risk of looking like a propagandist.

And because the news cycle thrives on ‘problems,’ journalists will often come to you with negatives to comment on – the challenge for spokespeople is to turn this around and bring the conversation back to our key messages (often, something highlighting those shared core values discussed above). In order to do that, try to remember these three steps: acknowledge, bridge, communicate.

Acknowledge the question; use a **bridging phrase** to change the direction of the conversation; **communicate** the key message you want to get across.

Common bridging phrases

I see that, but ... (key message)

Just to put this into some context ...

What we have to remember is ...

I do understand why people might think that, but ...

EXAMPLE

Q: Tens of thousands of people are still coming to the UK via 'illegal' routes/ via channel crossing - surely something bold needs to be done to deter them doesn't it?

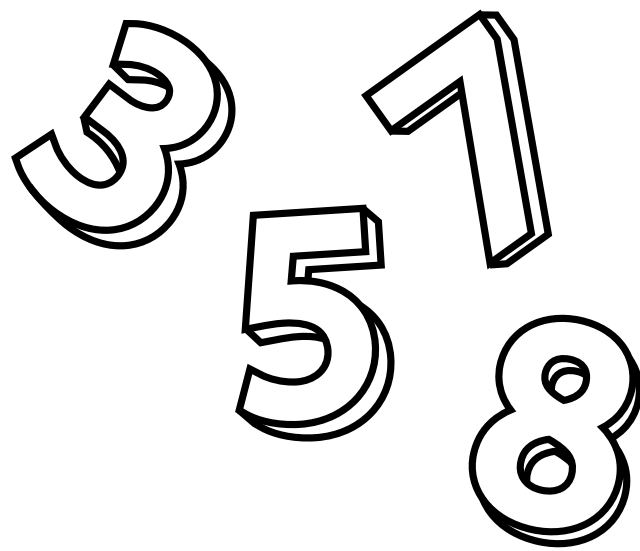
A: Look, no-one wants to see people risking their lives to get here - people fleeing danger want to come here via safe routes, they want to travel via plane or ferry or train just like you or I, but right now those safe routes simply don't exist.

AVOID TALKING NUMBERS

Journalists are often keen to talk big numbers – the hook for their story may be new figures coming out about the numbers of people who migrate to the UK, or the cost of providing housing to people seeking sanctuary. These framings are often used to spark fear and division in people, conjuring thoughts of scarce resources employed by the right and far right.

Instead of being drawn into questions about numbers, prices and “value for money” – even if you’re saying that something is good value for money – bring it back instead to the human lives at stake, and the shared values that connect us.

Try and avoid saying things like ‘the numbers of people coming here are actually quite small.’ Do make clear that lots of other countries have more newcomers than the UK – but saying the numbers coming here are small still makes migration a problem to be minimised and solved, rather than something to be welcomed.



EXAMPLE

Q: Data released by the government today shows record numbers of people crossing the Channel in small boats – don't you think that will put a strain on resources locally?

A: Like communities up and down the country, I know residents in my area have been struggling to make ends meet. But I think we need to point out who is to blame for that - and that's this government, who've imposed cut after cut on local councils, who've failed to invest in affordable housing, and who've run our NHS to the ground.

When I speak to local people, what they want to see is investment in our local community, not politicians trying to point the blame at refugees for their own failures.

DON'T REPEAT THE FRAME

Don't think of an elephant! What are you thinking of? Probably an elephant, right? All the research shows that if you repeat the framing people have already heard, they hear the message they've already been told, rather than whatever information you're giving them.

So if you say, with the best of intentions, 'migrants are not criminals,' the two things that stick out to a casual listener are 'migrants' and 'criminals.' There's a reason that the Government called the 2023 migration act the Illegal Migration Act. They wanted to cement in people's minds the idea that migration is unlawful – when in fact we know that seeking asylum is a universal human right protected under international law.

So if you're asked a question where migration and migrants are framed negatively, try to avoid repeating those words back, even to refute them – instead, bring it back to the values and focus on the positives.

EXAMPLE

Don't say: Most asylum-seekers are not bogus, and in fact are vulnerable people with very valid claims to be in this country

Do say: We all have the right to seek safety. When we do so, we deserve to have our claims judged fairly and quickly, so that we can settle into our new communities and start to rebuild our lives.

ADVANCE A POSITIVE VISION

There's so much negativity about migration out there. As someone speaking out in the media, one of the really powerful things you can do is push back against that, and highlight the amazing things that happen when communities are supported to thrive together.

EXAMPLE

People move – always have and always will. I’m proud to live in a place where new members of our community are welcomed and supported. It’s a testament to the strength of our community that, in the face of negativity and division coming from the Government in Westminster, we stick together

KEEP COMING BACK TO THE HUMAN

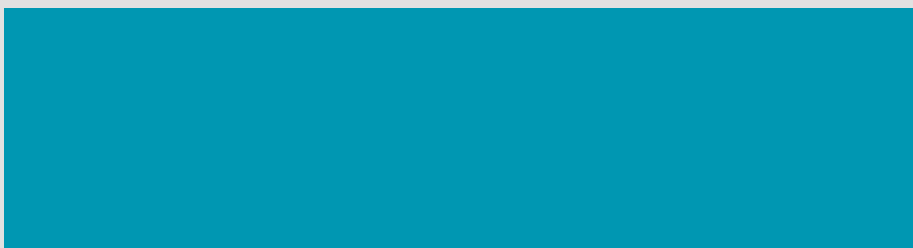
So much of how mainstream media talks about people who move is dehumanising – but as a councillor, you’ll know firsthand about the amazing people in your community, and what their stories can tell us about a wider issue. This includes powerful stories of welcome and solidarity, which can help push back against the perception common in the media, that the anti-migrant rhetoric of the Government is reflected across our communities.

So when you're speaking out in the media, keep coming back to the humans at the heart of this. Numbers and statistics can be really helpful to give context to your point – but often, a single human story can be just as powerful.

For that same reason, when talking about people, try to emphasise their humanity instead of using labels and jargon. We are all so much more than the labels others use to categorise us! So instead of 'asylum-seekers' and 'migrants,' try 'people seeking sanctuary' and 'people on the move.'

Finally, when we're talking about people, we should try and avoid language that strips away their agency. Many people who make the UK their home have been through huge challenges in their lives – but that doesn't define them. Talking about people in terms of their vulnerability conveys the message that 'we' have a responsibility to help 'them,' because we're in a position of power and they aren't. In reality, migration and migrants enrich our communities beyond measure.

The same goes for talking about people just in terms of what they can contribute to the economy. We're all worth so much more than just our economic value. So we shouldn't argue that people should have rights because they have skills that would be valuable for the British economy – instead, we all have rights based on our common humanity.



EXAMPLE

“People who’ve built their lives and families here should feel safe in the knowledge that this is their home, but this government makes life a minefield for people who move here.

One of my local constituents ____, has lived here for over ____ years. He’s worked as a ____ and been a vital part of our community, but he’s had to jump over endless hurdles, and pay tens of thousands of pounds in visa fees, just for the right to stay living and working here.

When he was going through a period of ill health, he struggled to pay visa fees, so he became undocumented. This government is unfortunately pushing lots of people, lots of families who’ve made the UK home, into terrible precarious situations like this.

We need this government to stop pushing people off track through sky-high visa fees and mind-boggling bureaucracy, and instead create accessible, affordable pathways to citizenship for migrants who live and work here.”