

## Making migration a human issue

This briefing is for anyone involved in communications work in areas of inward migration and those working in neighbourhoods to defuse community tensions.

### The issue

Migration is often presented as a difficult, contentious issue, and there are frequent pressures on local authorities and other statutory agencies to respond to legitimate concerns, scare stories and inaccurate facts. Often we reply with facts and statistics designed to inform and calm. But they don't often have that effect: instead they distance the listener from the migrant, make the migrant even more "other". That is because we live out our own stories and we respond to the stories of others, but do not necessarily respond rationally to statistics and facts. Skilled communicators know this: that is why politicians talk to us about "a man they met yesterday" more than about the percentages of people this may apply to.

So those involved with improving community relations need to be able to communicate about migrants and migration in a way that is effective and responsible. And that is everyone in statutory agencies because they are subject to the public sector equality duty to "foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not". Most migrants share a protected characteristic because nationality is included in the definition of race in the Equalities Act.

### Communications practice

- Must be based on a **shared commitment by the organisation to the core messages**. Developing an agency wide approach to enhancing positive perceptions of migration and diversity is covered in detail by a [Eurocities toolkit](#)
- Should provide **consistent messaging** throughout the organisation with a named person responsible for this
- Has to **understand the audience** it wants to reach and tailor the approach and content (NOT the core message) appropriately

While messages may be in response to specific enquiries, to maximise their effectiveness they should be aimed at and addressed to the widest possible audience. That will usually be what is often called 'the anxious middle': worried about immigration, but not holding anti-

migrant views particularly. This is about 61% of the population<sup>1</sup>, and even more (83%) agree that those who “play by the rules” (speak our language, obey our laws and pay taxes) should count as equally British and be able to reach their potential.

So we need stories that will appeal to this audience: of people who share aspirations with them, who may have overcome significant difficulties in the past (not necessarily migration-related) but are now recognisably part of local communities. What sort of stories?

- **True stories by real, identifiable people** who have consented to share them work very well. Having a bank of people prepared to do interviews, talk to meetings and meet influencers is a great resource. Pictures, including pictures of the home, family etc humanise even more
- **Anonymous stories** work well where there is a good, simple explanation for the anonymity that can be shared. Some visual material helps: a picture of a previous home, of the area in which they now live, of hands, of an important object in the story, or a line drawing representing the person
- **Composite stories or case studies** are very useful in explaining service delivery issues or training but you have to be very clear how they were created (i.e. from real experiences and real people and then reworked to make them anonymous and more useful) and the criteria used (are these exceptional or typical? How many in the population?)
- **Cartoons or animations** work well especially online. It is worth identifying talent in this area to use.
- **Fiction can work** as long as it is clearly badged as such, comes from real experiences and is not too “preachy”. Stories written by children and young people can express their hopes and needs and reach wide audiences.
- **Simple self-expression also works** especially where it is enabled by art or culture. [Music in Detention](#) provides a voice for immigration detainees through participative music workshops, but also projects the idea that detainees have a lot in common with many other groups, by helping them write songs together.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the material here is from very useful research by British Future summarised in “How to Talk about Immigration : see Help section at the end

## Dos and don'ts

- ✓ **Do** make sure everyone you work with knows what the key messages are
- ✓ **Do** collect stories wherever and whenever you can: get the basic story written up, get visual material if possible (if not photos of the person, maybe of a place? an object? Drawings?) make a note of issues like anonymity, or whether the story is a composite
- ✓ **Do** maintain a bank of stories, accessible under different criteria (age, gender, reason for arrival, interesting facts, area, employment etc) and make sure that all communications staff know about them
- ✓ **Do** nurture your storytellers and make sure they know how appreciated they are
- ✓ **Do** collect stories of migrant interaction with others in the community, include quotes and use them to build up a positive picture of a welcoming place
- ✓ **Do** prepare people who may do interviews, explain that the media may be hostile, go over what they most want to say, offer practice sessions, check there are no “skeletons in the cupboard”
- ✓ **Do** use stories and real people across service delivery, for example in training or to frame policy documents
- ✓ **Do** use events to tell and collect stories: group pictures with the stories of quotes from two or three participants are very effective
  
- × **Don't** just use stories responsively: integrate them into all areas of practice and use them to introduce and explain
- × **Don't** just use migrant stories to explain about migration: incorporate them into communications about all other areas: this makes them seem more like a normal part of the community
- × **Don't** worry too much about how individuals will deal with the media: if you have prepared them and done the basic checks, minor mistakes will not matter. In fact, it makes them appear more human.
- × **Don't** just use migrant stories: build up a bank of parallel stories that can be used to compare and to defuse perceptions of unequal treatment
- × **Don't** create entirely fictional stories yourself: make sure that composites and case studies are anchored in reality and you have the factual background to hand
- × **Don't** use the same people too often: keep looking for new faces

## Examples of good practice

[Kirklees](#) used the Big Lunch to bring people together across divides, and enable them to talk and listen to each other even about controversial stuff. They evaluated using story boards with photos and quotes. They have also used the story of a popular local migrant family who set up a very well used restaurant and now employ 17 people and pay £50,000 p.a. in council taxes.

The [Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#) has commissioned a report aimed at funders and housing providers to encourage them to support projects helping destitute migrants. It includes 14 “people” (who are composites but based on real people via research with relevant agencies across England) who cover all types of situation, need etc, and are legally accurate, so give a good idea of the sort of resources needed as well as the needs. This enables the audience to engage with real needs and circumstances.

[Migration Yorkshire](#) has a team of migrant volunteers recruited as part of Integration Up North. They are trained and supported and used to provide case examples for the publications but also form part of the training events, talking about their experiences of service use. These have focused the events on real people and made them much more accessible and useful.

The [Open Society Foundations](#) publish “Meet the Somalis” on their website. It is a collection of 14 illustrated stories depicting the real life experiences of Somalis in seven cities in Europe. “We met individuals and families from the Somali community—young, old, comfortable and poor, more and less religious, first and second generation, and some who had only recently arrived. We visited their homes, cafés, or places of work and listened to their disparate stories. We asked three questions:

1. What was life like in Somalia before you left? How and why did you leave?
2. How was the “settling in” phase of life in Europe?
3. What is your present-day life like, as a Somali living in this European city?”

The authors found people through local contacts generated by a research project, took photographs, wrote scripts then did the cartoons, which are “animated” via moving through moving from frame to frame on screen.

[Rotherham](#) neighbourhood managers and community development workers did an end of year celebration of clean up activity which attracted 70-80 people. There were Roma dances and other cultural sharing. One white British woman (Glynis) was interviewed and quoted as saying how much the community had improved, how it was cleaner and more vibrant and diverse. This is an example of useful ‘disruptive communication’ i.e. somebody you would expect to say one thing, saying another.

The [Movement Against Xenophobia](#) crowdfunded a poster campaign leading up to the election featuring real stories of people under the headline “I am an immigrant”. The posters appeared nationwide but also attracted international media coverage.

## Help!

The Human Library is a way to enable people to have safe, respectful conversations with people they would not normally meet. <http://humanlibraryuk.org/>

- *“Just like in a real library, a visitor to the Human Library can choose a Book from a range of titles. The difference is that Books are people, and reading is a conversation.....The Human Library provides a safe environment for people to engage in conversation within a framework of respect, and with the permission to respectfully ask questions and share experiences. The dialogue that the Human Library facilitates has the potential to challenge prejudice, stigma and discrimination.....”*
- Detention Action is training ex detainees to speak about their experiences to different audiences <http://detentionaction.org.uk/>
- Migration Yorkshire [www.migrationyorkshire.org.uk](http://www.migrationyorkshire.org.uk)
- Migrants contribute is an initiative to bring migrants voices to the fore in discussions in the UK, training up ChangeMakers to challenge negative representations of migrants: some may be available for meetings etc. <http://contribute.migrantsrights.org.uk/>
- Eurocities toolkit on enhancing positive perceptions of migration and diversity with good practice examples from all over Europe:
- <http://nws.eurocities.eu/MediaShell/media/Enhancing%20public%20perception%20of%20migrants.pdf>
- British Future research on how to talk about immigration : the summary
- <http://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/How-to-Talk-About-Immigration-briefly.pdf>
- A briefing prepared for a European Foundations initiative on migration, on how to communicate better on migration, including many good practice examples
- [http://www.epim.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/EPIM\\_briefing\\_Telling-our-stories.pdf](http://www.epim.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/EPIM_briefing_Telling-our-stories.pdf)
- The music from Music in Detention may also prove useful: <http://www.musicindetention.org.uk/>

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