

Britainthinks

Insight & Strategy

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Understanding attitudes towards non-UK nationals facing homelessness

Summary of qualitative and quantitative research
conducted for Crisis

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Introduction

Background and objectives

We know that a significant proportion of the people experiencing homelessness in the UK are originally from another country. Although there are substantial gaps in the data available, we know that in some areas, such as London, around half of people rough sleeping were born outside the UK.

Crisis services help people experiencing homelessness, regardless of where they are from, but current Government policies mean some non-UK nationals are locked out of the support they need to help to prevent or resolve their homelessness. This means it can often take months, even years in some cases, to help a non-UK national to end their homelessness as they can face additional barriers and issues accessing support that UK nationals do not.

Crisis' aim is to end homelessness for good, and this can only be achieved if the specific barriers that affect people who are not originally from the UK are addressed. Making sure that no one is homeless because of their immigration status is therefore one of Crisis' campaigning priorities.

To support this work, BritainThinks was commissioned to deliver a programme of quantitative and qualitative research with members of the general public, Crisis supporters and stakeholders in order to inform future campaigns. In particular, the research sought to explore baseline understanding of and attitudes to the issue of non-UK nationals experiencing (or at risk of) homelessness, as well as the most effective messaging to build awareness and support for the cause.

This report provides a short summary of the findings from the research and our recommended guidelines for communicating on the issue. Please note that this report does not include findings from research conducted with Crisis supporters.

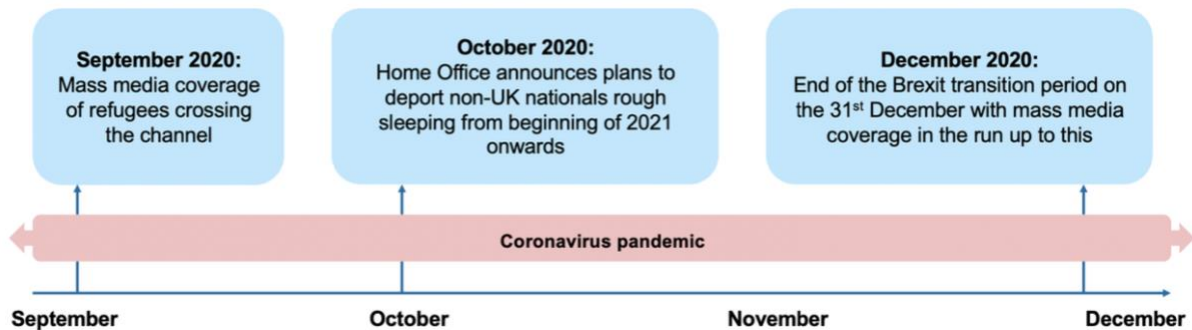
Method

Our research approach comprised several complementary elements, combining primary and secondary research, as well as qualitative and quantitative methods. An overview of our approach is below:

1. Rapid review of existing research and communications on the issue;
2. Message-development workshop to begin process of developing messaging territories;
3. Focus groups with the general public (x 6) – focusing on those who do not have very strong pre-existing views on the issue – and focus groups with Crisis supporters (x 2), as well as depth interviews with stakeholders (x 5), to explore attitudes toward the issue and gauge responses to messaging;
4. A nationally-representative online survey of the general public and an open-link survey shared with Crisis supporters to quantify findings from qualitative fieldwork.

Understanding attitudes towards non-UK nationals facing homelessness

Fieldwork was conducted between 24th September and 1st December 2020. It is important to situate this research within the context in which it was conducted in order to understand how this may have influenced perceptions. The fieldwork was conducted against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic and widespread media coverage on a number of relevant issues.



Summary of key findings

1. While homelessness was a salient, emotive and high priority issue, the specific issue of homelessness among non-UK nationals was not front-of-mind for any of the key audiences – and there was very limited understanding of any unique, structural challenges that non-UK nationals face.

Among the public, non-UK nationals were rarely mentioned when thinking about a ‘typical homeless person’. In addition, there was very limited appreciation of the additional barriers that non-UK nationals face; the perceived challenges tended to be limited to language barriers, no knowledge of ‘the system’ and lack of a support network – rather than wider systemic or structural barriers.

For most stakeholders, the issue of homelessness among non-UK nationals was not top of their agenda and most claimed limited knowledge about the issue. They tended to have a very general understanding of the additional barriers that non-UK nationals who are homeless face, citing similar barriers to the public. However, an additional barrier mentioned by stakeholders was discrimination or stigma towards non-UK nationals among the public. A few stakeholders who had more knowledge of the issue also cited employment restrictions, the no recourse to public funds (NRPF) policy, and the slow immigration system as additional barriers faced by non-UK nationals who are homeless.

2. The topic of homelessness among non-UK nationals was narrowly associated with Channel crossings and people seeking asylum. This strongly coloured views toward the issue and divided opinion, with many prioritising addressing ‘illegal’ immigration¹ over tackling homelessness among non-UK nationals (if not outright opposing the latter).

The public spontaneously associated the issue of homelessness among non-UK nationals with recent arrivals to the UK – particularly channel crossings and people seeking asylum. There was an assumption that ‘homelessness among non-UK nationals’ is a related, short-term issue for recent arrivals.

Despite underlying support for ending all homelessness, there were some concerns or reservations about supporting non-UK nationals specifically:

- Some believed that the issue of homelessness among non-UK nationals could be solved simply by clamping down on ‘illegal’ immigration and, in any case, that this was a more urgent issue and should be prioritised over supporting homeless non-UK nationals.
- There was concern that creating a ‘favourable’ system that supports non-UK nationals experiencing homelessness might encourage further (‘illegal’) immigration.

¹ ‘Illegal’ immigration is referred to here as this was terminology commonly used by focus group participants themselves.

- There were high levels of concern that supporting non-UK nationals experiencing homelessness would increase pressure on already limited government resources for homelessness (particularly due to budget cuts and Covid-19), meaning less support for UK nationals.

Of the stakeholders interviewed as part of this project, few perceived homelessness among non-UK nationals to be a high priority issue – largely because there is little perceived public interest. MPs reported that the issue was rarely, if ever, raised by constituents, and journalists noted that they were preoccupied with Covid-19 – with little space for anything else on the agenda.

There was recognition among stakeholders that homelessness among non-UK nationals was likely to be worsening and required attention. However, stakeholders cautioned against this coming at the expense of support for UK nationals facing homelessness and some reflected wider public views that the issue of ‘illegal’ immigration should be more of a priority.

3. Even among those who were less concerned about ‘illegal’ immigration and less inclined to prioritise tackling homelessness among UK nationals, there was some reluctance to ‘single out’ non-UK nationals or discriminate between different groups of homeless people, rather than considering the issue of homelessness as a whole.

Among the public, opposition to ‘singling out’ homeless non-UK nationals united those who were pro-immigration with those who were anti-immigration. Those who were more pro-immigration felt that all people experiencing homelessness should be treated equally, while those who were more anti-immigration felt that the focus should be on supporting UK nationals experiencing homelessness. Both groups tended to oppose positively discriminating in favour of non-UK nationals who are homeless.

4. There was, though, relatively widespread support for a range of specific policy initiatives which tended to feel reasonable and equitable, such as improving the decision-making process in the immigration system and better access to legal advice.

Across all audiences, there was little pre-existing awareness of possible policy solutions (nor of structural/systemic barriers that homeless non-UK nationals face), and an assumption that the only solution to homelessness is the provision of council or other subsidised housing. As a result, there was an assumption that the policy ‘ask’ is preferential treatment for non-UK nationals – specifically, priority on council housing waiting lists.

On prompting, however, there was relatively widespread support for most policy initiatives tested. The most popular policies related to reducing bureaucratic barriers that non-UK nationals might face (i.e. improving the quality of decision-making in the immigration and asylum system) and providing access to support and advice. These garnered widespread support as they were seen as a ‘no brainer’ by most and perceived to be relatively uncontroversial.

There were also high levels of support for extending the period during which the Home Office provides temporary accommodation for newly-recognised refugees to 56 days, supporting EEA/EU

nationals to apply to the EU Settlement Scheme, and providing intensive employment support to help non-UK nationals into work.

Overall, most of the policies tested² often hadn't been considered before, and they generally felt modest, achievable and equitable – though some had reservations about how likely they were to be implemented.

5. Messaging that used a broader 'universal' frame was significantly more popular than equivalent messaging using a more explicit 'non-UK national' frame. Within the 'non-UK national' frame, the most resonant territories appeared to be those that make a strong moral statement – though practical arguments about integration and economic contribution were also important for more sceptical audiences.

We tested 7 messages with an explicit 'non-UK national' frame – and 7 parallel messages with a broader 'universal' frame. For example:

- Universal frame: *'Having a home is a basic human need and should apply to everyone, regardless of who they are.'*
- Non-UK national homeless frame: *'Having a home is a basic human need and should apply to everyone, regardless of whether or not they were born in the UK.'*

For each message pair, the message with the broader, 'universal' frame was significantly more popular with the public than the message with the more explicit 'migrant' frame.

For the messaging using a 'non-UK national' frame, the most effective territories were those making a strong 'moral' argument – though the 'contribution' territory was also persuasive:

Most resonant	<i>Having a home is a basic human need and should apply to everyone, regardless of whether or not they were born in the UK</i>
	<i>Nobody in the UK should be homeless in this day and age just because of where they happen to have been born</i>
	<i>Without a safe place to live, non-UK nationals can't integrate and contribute to society</i>
	<i>We can only end homelessness in the UK if we end homelessness for everyone, including those who were not born in the UK</i>
Least resonant	<i>Preventing non-UK nationals from becoming homeless in the first place is better than having to provide expensive emergency outreach support</i>
	<i>We need to support non-UK nationals to avoid homelessness and protect them from exploitative employment or modern slavery</i>
	<i>We should ensure a level playing field for non-UK nationals so that everyone in the UK has a fair chance of getting out of homelessness</i>

² For more detail on the policies explored, please see Chapter 4 (p.38 – p.49) of the full report.

The focus groups provided some indication as to why certain messaging territories resonated more:

1. *'Having a home is a basic human need and should apply to everyone, regardless of whether or not they were born in the UK'*. Most agreed with the statement as the sentiment of inclusivity and universalism feels compelling and difficult to disagree with.
2. *'Nobody in the UK should be homeless in this day and age just because of where they happen to have been born'*. The emphasis on inclusivity and equality felt compelling and difficult to disagree with. In addition, the message reflected the public's own language and views and felt intuitive and convincing.
3. *'Without a safe place to live, non-UK nationals can't integrate and contribute to society'*. This argument made intuitive sense to most (i.e. needing a home in order to work) and ideas of contribution/integration addressed concerns more sceptical audiences have about ('illegal') immigration.
4. *'We can only end homelessness in the UK if we end homelessness for everyone, including those who were not born in the UK'*. This message felt logical and convincing to most – but not always emotive and motivating. Some felt that the overall goal of ending homelessness was unrealistic.

N.B. The findings of this message testing reinforce the broader messaging recommendations as part of Crisis' separate work with the Frameworks Institute on reframing homelessness. Please see the separate report on these findings [here](#).

Recommendations for communicating about homelessness amongst non-UK nationals

Drawing on all research elements, we developed five guidelines to help build support for addressing homelessness among non-UK nationals:

- 1. Wherever possible, use a broader ‘universal’ frame to build support for particular policies rather than a specific migration/non-UK national frame.** The public is very divided on the issue and there is little common ground between those who are pro-immigration and anti-immigration. Messaging using the broader, ‘universal’ frame proved significantly more popular than the more explicit ‘migration’ frame.
- 2. If a specific non-UK national frame is needed, use the term ‘non-UK national’ rather than ‘migrant’. This proved a more neutral term than ‘migrant’ which has negative connotations and strong associations with ‘illegal’ immigration and Channel crossings.** If needing to identify a specific group, neutral and less technical terms are generally preferred, e.g.
 - ‘People seeking safety or fleeing persecution’ rather than ‘asylum seekers’
 - ‘People originally from Europe’ rather than ‘EEA/EU citizens/nationals’
 - ‘People with no immigration status’ rather than ‘undocumented migrant’
- 3. Put the specific policy asks – which were generally popular and mitigated concerns about preferential treatment for non-UK nationals – front-and-centre of any campaign.** In the context of low, spontaneous awareness of policy solutions, and an assumption that it must entail preferential treatment for council housing, policy solutions like improved access to legal advice and improved decision making in the immigration system generally felt modest, achievable and equitable.
- 4. Emotive moral arguments were generally the most effective for communicating on this issue, though messages about integration and economic contribution can also be persuasive for more sceptical audiences.** The message ‘Having a home is a basic human need and should apply to everyone, regardless of whether or not they were born in the UK’ garnered greatest support.
- 5. Provide clear evidence and examples of the scale of non-UK nationals facing homelessness and position any campaigning carefully as one of a number of campaign priorities, giving the impression of the ‘bigger picture’ of homelessness.** Across all audiences, few felt confident about the scale of the issue and often assumed the proportion of the homeless population who are non-UK nationals to be small and mostly made up of recent arrivals to the country, specifically those seeking asylum. There was considerable concern about homelessness among the UK-born population, too, and an assumption among many that this was a ‘bigger problem’. The public is looking for reassurance that supporting non-UK nationals experiencing homelessness will not come at the expense of UK nationals and would make a significant difference to the problem of homelessness overall.