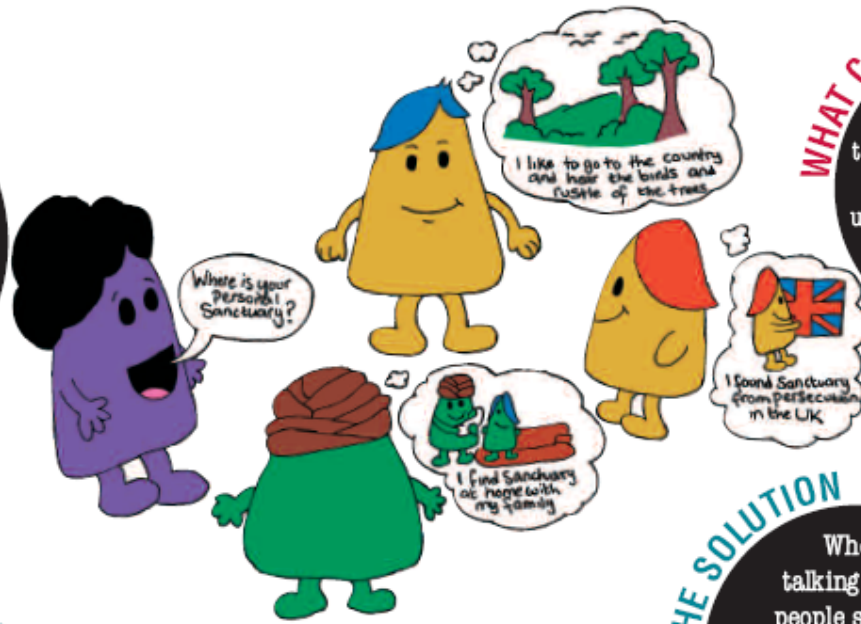


**THE ISSUE**

People are confused about the word 'asylum' and do not share a common understanding that it means providing sanctuary to people fleeing persecution.



**WHAT CAN I DO?**

Try to use the term 'sanctuary' when talking about people fleeing from persecution. People understand 'sanctuary' and 85% of the public think it is a positive word.

**WHAT CAN I DO?**

Help people understand what it means to be a person seeking sanctuary from persecution by asking them if they have a personal sanctuary.

**THE SOLUTION**

When talking about people seeking sanctuary from persecution avoid using the term 'asylum'.

**WHAT CAN I DO?**

Encourage your local MP, newspaper and council to use alternatives to "asylum" like 'sanctuary'.

A RECENT OPINION POLL SHOWED THAT MORE PEOPLE ASSOCIATE THE WORD 'ASYLUM' WITH MENTAL ILLNESS THAN WITH PROVIDING A SAFE HAVEN TO THOSE FLEEING PERSECUTION

For more information and advice on how to perform these actions visit: [www.citizensforsanctuary.org.uk](http://www.citizensforsanctuary.org.uk)

# CITIZEN ACTION TOOLKIT 1: Mind Your Language!

**Language is powerful.** The words we use say a lot about who we are and what we believe in. And when it comes to how the public views people who flee persecution, language is especially important.

The Independent Asylum Commission undertook the most detailed research ever done on how people respond to the different words we use in relation to people seeking sanctuary. **So mind your language and use it to create change.**

**What will I find in this toolkit?**

- The issue 1
- The solution 2
- What can I do as an individual? 3
- What can I do in my own community? 4
- What can I do to change the world? 5
- Resources 6

10 WAYS FOR CITIZENS TO SAVE SANCTUARY



This toolkit is a supplement to the '10 Ways for Citizens to Save Sanctuary' booklet. You can download an electronic version or order copies of the full booklet at [www.citizensforsanctuary.org.uk](http://www.citizensforsanctuary.org.uk).

People are confused about the word 'asylum' and do not share a common understanding that it means providing sanctuary to people fleeing persecution.

### The Facts

Only 18% of the British public think that the word 'asylum' is a positive term.

More people associate the word 'asylum' with mental illness than they do with providing sanctuary to people fleeing persecution.

"To most people the term 'asylum seeker' just means anybody who comes to live off our state system." Cardiff Focus Group

### Links

Mark Easton's article on the history of 'asylum'  
[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/7409616.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/7409616.stm)  
Independent Asylum Commission - public attitudes  
[www.citizensforsanctuary.org.uk/report1](http://www.citizensforsanctuary.org.uk/report1)

**The word 'asylum' is not helpful for people who care about people who come to the UK in search of sanctuary.**

What does the word 'asylum' mean to you?

The Independent Asylum Commission spent a lot of time finding out how the British people respond to the words we use to describe people who are fleeing persecution. First we conducted focus groups in eight cities across the UK, asking a demographically balanced group of citizens, recruited by a market research company, for their views. We did not mention the word 'asylum' for the first half an hour, using terms such as 'sanctuary' or 'people fleeing persecution' instead. The response was generally positive, with people of all classes and ages in all the cities we visited, agreeing that it was important to provide sanctuary to people fleeing persecution.

Then we asked for people's views on asylum and asylum seekers. Cue a torrent of hatred, fear and abuse. People could not see the connection between the term 'asylum' and the people they had just said they wanted to provide sanctuary to! They complained of French asylum seekers not learning English (number of French asylum seekers in the UK = 0), and of Polish asylum seekers stealing their jobs (number of Polish asylum seekers in the UK = 0). They blamed asylum seekers for bringing down the standard of their neighbourhood, taking their benefits, pushing up their taxes, eating their dogs, and stealing their women. This was despite 80% of participants never having met an asylum seeker. It seems that for many people the word asylum has become a term of abuse for foreigners living in Britain.

We decided to test this finding through an opinion poll conducted by a professional pollster. It found that only 18% of the public view the word 'asylum' as a positive term, and more people associated the word with mental illness than with providing a safe haven to people fleeing persecution! We also tested this at over 50 People's Commissions across the country that asked ordinary people what term they thought should be used to describe people who come to the UK fleeing persecution. Unsurprisingly, having spent time discussing the issue, asylum was not near the top of the list...

**TIP: READ UP ON ASYLUM'S LONG HISTORY AS A 'BOO' WORD. MARK EASTON, THE BBC'S HOME AFFAIRS EDITOR, WROTE AN ESSAY TO COINCIDE WITH THE INDEPENDENT ASYLUM COMMISSION'S RECOMMENDATIONS THAT CHARTED THE WORD'S DIFFICULT HISTORY.**

## THE SOLUTION

When talking about people seeking sanctuary from persecution avoid using the term 'asylum'.

### The Facts

85% of the British public accept that the political situation in some countries means that some people have to leave their homes.

*"The concept of sanctuary must be distinguished very clearly from economic migration, through avoiding the term 'asylum' and choosing appropriate and understood terminology."*

Independent Asylum Commission, *Saving Sanctuary* report

### Links

Independent Asylum Commission – public attitudes  
[www.citizensforsanctuary.org.uk/report1](http://www.citizensforsanctuary.org.uk/report1)

### Is it possible to break the habit of a lifetime?

It may appear petty to focus on the language we use to describe people fleeing from persecution when there is so much that needs to be done to secure justice for such people and to rebuild public support for sanctuary.

Yet language is crucial if we want to communicate effectively. It is common sense that if you are trying to communicate a message to people your message will be lost if you use language that confuses and alienates them.

Well, the evidence shows that we confuse and alienate people when we use the word 'asylum'. Every time we use the term 'asylum', eight out of ten people in the audience will instinctively respond negatively to the word – in the same way that they might to the word 'criminal' or 'paedophile'. Most of the audience will be confused about the terminology and whether it includes Poles and Romanians. More of them will be thinking about mental illness than people seeking sanctuary from persecution.

Such is the confusion that the Independent Asylum Commission concluded that

*"...there is grave misunderstanding in the public mind about the term 'asylum' which if not addressed threatens to undermine support for the UK's proud tradition of providing sanctuary to those fleeing persecution."*

Should we try to claim the term back? Why don't we invest in education so that the public realize that we are talking about people fleeing persecution?

This is a common reaction among those working to support refugees. Sadly it is misguided. It is not a small number of people who have a problem with the word 'asylum' – it is 82% of the population! We are pretty sure that asking the 18% to convert the 82% will not work – the stigma attached to the word 'asylum' is too ingrained and past attempts at public education on this issue have not succeeded.

So we need a new language that the public understands. We need a new language that people can relate to and feel positive about. We need a new language that can apply to people fleeing persecution. But most of all, we need to avoid using the alienating and confusing 'asylum'.

**TIP: WHY NOT MAKE A 'SWEAR BOX' AND DONATE A POUND EVERY TIME YOU USE THE WORD 'ASYLUM'. YOU COULD USE THE PROCEEDS FOR LOCAL CAMPAIGNING.**

## WHAT CAN I DO?

Try to use the term 'sanctuary' when talking about people fleeing from persecution. People understand 'sanctuary' and 85% of the public think it is a positive word.



### The Facts

85% of the British public think that the word 'sanctuary' is a positive term.

"For me, sanctuary means a safe place – a safe haven for those who need it."  
Birmingham Focus Group.

66% of the British public agree that it is important for the UK to provide sanctuary to people fleeing persecution.

### Links

Independent Asylum Commission opinion poll  
[http://www.citizensforsanctuary.org.uk/pages/reports/report1/7\\_OpinionPoll.pdf](http://www.citizensforsanctuary.org.uk/pages/reports/report1/7_OpinionPoll.pdf)

## You say tomato, I say tomato. You say potato, I say potato. You say asylum, I say... sanctuary?

So here is where it gets practical. Not only should you avoid using the term 'asylum', but we think you should use 'sanctuary' instead.

The first contrast to draw between sanctuary and asylum is that 85% of the public respond positively to 'sanctuary' with only 18% feeling the same about 'asylum'. Emotional response to language is very important. If we want the public to feel positive about people fleeing persecution then it makes sense for us to use words they will respond to positively.

Secondly, people understand the term 'sanctuary'. In the Independent Asylum Commission's focus groups across the UK it was very obvious that the participants were not at all clear about what 'asylum' was (confusing it with economic migration and mental illness) but had a very clear idea of 'sanctuary' as a safe haven, a safe place for those who need it. They also indicated that if someone was to talk to them about a person fleeing persecution they would respond more positively if the word 'sanctuary' was used, and less positively if 'asylum' was used.

No-one is pretending that if you use 'sanctuary' the stigma will disappear and everything will be ok. But the Independent Asylum Commission's polling shows that most people agree that providing sanctuary to people fleeing persecution is a good thing, and that if you avoid 'asylum' you will tap in to this shared British value.

So instead of saying 'asylum', say 'sanctuary'. Don't say 'asylum seeker', say 'person seeking sanctuary'. Refrain from 'refused' or 'failed asylum seeker', instead use 'person refused sanctuary'.

You will notice that we don't recommend using 'sanctuary seeker'. This is because we don't want to replace one label that has become a term of abuse with another label that could soon become a term of abuse too. Ok, so it takes longer to say 'person seeking sanctuary' but it is a timely reminder that we are talking about people and not objects.

One final objection – some people complain that 'sanctuary' is a religious word that will offend people without faith. Interestingly our polling showed that only 12% of the public consider sanctuary to be a religious term – more people associated it with a safe place for animals and wildlife!

## WHAT CAN I DO?

Help people understand what it means to be a person seeking sanctuary from persecution by asking them if they have a personal sanctuary.

### The Facts

Over half of the British public have somewhere that is a personal sanctuary for them.

My sanctuary is:

*"when I get to bed at night. With four kids and a full-time job, it is the only place I find peace."*

*"a walk in the countryside."*

*"my bedroom – nobody disturbs me there."*

*"watching Arsenal play – it is my only escape from the stresses and strains of modern life."*

### Further details

For details on the *Saving Sanctuary* exhibition contact [carina.crawford-rolt@cof.org.uk](mailto:carina.crawford-rolt@cof.org.uk)

### Where do other people find sanctuary?

The traditional approach to educating the public about people fleeing from persecution is to assume that that most people are ignorant, prejudiced, and accept whatever they read in the newspapers. So resources have focused on 'mythbusting'. Useful as these resources often are, research shows that in many circumstances they simply confirm the myths that people hold.

The Independent Asylum Commission's Public Attitudes Research Project identified that a more effective way of engaging the public was not to tell them that what they believe is wrong, but begin by getting them to think deeply about the idea of sanctuary and what it means to them.

You see, when we asked people in our focus groups to define 'sanctuary' they could all do so easily. What is more, they were able to reach a consensus on the definition and felt positive about the word. We then asked people if they had a personal sanctuary and were surprised by how many people told us about their sanctuary – over half of the people we polled.

Once people understand the word sanctuary and can relate it to their own experience, we found that they were able to think much more creatively about other people who might need sanctuary. It wasn't long before they began to think about people fleeing persecution.

This is a much healthier starting point for a discussion about people seeking sanctuary than telling them that what they believed, based on what they had read in the newspapers, was all wrong. They began to question their own assumptions and prejudices and understand more fully why someone might want to leave their home and seek sanctuary somewhere. People don't argue with their own data!

So why not use this exercise in your community? Be the spark that transforms attitudes in your church, mosque, school or community organisation by asking people if they have a personal sanctuary. Use their personal experience as a starting point to discuss the issues affecting people who seek sanctuary in the UK. You could do this in conversation, at a coffee morning, or in assembly – and why not invite a person who has sought sanctuary in the UK to share their story too?

**TIP: ARRANGE A LOCAL VIEWING OF OUR SAVING SANCTUARY PHOTOGRAPHIC EXHIBITION WHICH ALLOWS VISITORS TO RECORD WHERE THEY FIND SANCTUARY.**

## WHAT CAN I DO?

Encourage your local MP, newspaper and council to use alternatives to "asylum" like 'sanctuary'.

### The Facts

Only 18% of the British public think that the word 'asylum' is a positive term.

71% of the British public think that information they receive is not clear about the distinctions between different groups of migrants.

One in three of the British public think that their local newspaper is an important source of information on sanctuary.

### Links

Daily Telegraph style guide – list of banned words:  
[www.telegraph.co.uk/topics/about-us/style-book/1435286/Telegraph-Style-Book-Banned-words.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/topics/about-us/style-book/1435286/Telegraph-Style-Book-Banned-words.html)

### Getting influential people to mind their language too

It is all very well for individuals and communities to start talking about 'sanctuary' rather than 'asylum', but if we want to make a really big impact then we need to persuade our community leaders and opinion-formers to mind their language too.

Most community leaders are not aware of the Independent Asylum Commission's public attitudes research and so continue to use the term 'asylum' without realising the confusion they are causing. This was reflected in our focus group and polling research which found that there was a deep confusion about the different terms for migrant groups, and 71% of the public thought the information they received from politicians and the media was not clear about the distinctions between the different groups of migrants.

One politician that did get the message was a Junior Minister from the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in Northern Ireland. Jeffrey Donaldson MLA MP and his colleague Gerry Kelly MLA, attended the Independent Asylum Commission's report launch in Northern Ireland. After hearing Commission Co-chair Ifath Nawaz outline the findings and recommendations on the use of language, Minister Donaldson went through his prepared speech crossing out the word asylum and replacing it with 'sanctuary'. The impact was amazing, transforming the atmosphere in the room and giving a much clearer message to the people of Northern Ireland who were watching on television.

So if a Minister in Northern Ireland can do it, there is no reason why your local MP or council leader cannot do it as well. Why not write to them with the suggestion or, even better, go along to their constituency surgery and ask them to use the term 'sanctuary' when talking to constituents, speaking in the House of Commons, or appearing in the media? It will cost them nothing!

And you could also try the same with your local newspaper editor. Local newspapers are likely to have a style guide and, in some cases, a list of banned words that their journalists are forbidden from using – see the amusing Daily Telegraph example in the links section. Meet with your local newspaper editor to talk about the importance of using language responsibly and ask them to update their style guide accordingly.

**TIP: TRY TO MEET WITH YOUR TARGET FACE-TO-FACE AND NEGOTIATE WITH THEM. FOR SUPPORT USE THE RESOURCES BELOW OR CONTACT [carina.crawford-rolt@cof.org.uk](mailto:carina.crawford-rolt@cof.org.uk)**

# Resources

## About the Public Attitudes Research Project

The Independent Asylum Commission conducted two focus groups of eight to sixteen people weighted by age, social class and gender in Birmingham, Oxford, Cardiff, Barking and Dagenham, Hackney, Glasgow, Plymouth and Sheffield in March 2008. Research consultancy was provided by the Institute for Public Policy Research (ippr) and the participants were recruited by Leftfield, an independent market research agency. Participants were not aware of the subject of the focus group in advance and were offered a £25 incentive.

In-depth case-study interviews were conducted with a range of community leaders in each of the eight cities listed above to identify local attitudes to sanctuary and asylum between July 2007 and March 2008.

All opinion poll results are taken from research commissioned by the Independent Asylum Commission. efeedback Research conduct opinion research using an online panel of more than 190,000 UK residents. A sub-sample representative of the UK population is drawn from the panel for each poll. The results of this opinion poll are based on 1,024 completes gathered online from respondents based across the UK. Data was weighted to the profile of all UK residents, not just those with access to the internet, over the age of 17. Data was weighted by age, gender, occupation and region. Fieldwork began on 2/5/2008 and concluded on 12/5/2008.

The results and relevant recommendations can be found in the Commission's Saving Sanctuary report, pages 13-18:  
<http://www.citizensforsanctuary.org.uk/pages/reports/SavingSanctuary.pdf>.

## Contacting your MP

First of all, find out who your Member of Parliament (or MP) is by typing in your postcode here: <http://findyourmp.parliament.uk>. Or you can send them an email directly using this site: [www.writetothem.org.uk](http://www.writetothem.org.uk). Remember, MPs will only respond if you live in their constituency, so make sure you get the right MP! If you want to research your MP to find out what they think about this particular issue then you can use [www.theyworkforyou.com](http://www.theyworkforyou.com) to search their speeches and questions in Parliament or see if they have their own website.

The best option is to see if they run drop-in constituency surgeries and arrange to meet them face-to-face – perhaps with a coalition of others in your local area to back you up! That way you can hand them the Commission's findings in person and ask them to commit to changing their language.

If you want to write or send an email, then here is a draft letter which you can modify:

Dear Mr/Mrs Smith,

I am writing as your constituent to make you aware of the work of the Independent Asylum Commission which has recently published 180 recommendations for reform to secure justice for people fleeing persecution and rebuild public support for sanctuary.

A new campaign, called *CITIZENS for Sanctuary*, has been launched to implement the Commission's recommendations ([www.citizensforsanctuary.org.uk](http://www.citizensforsanctuary.org.uk)). *CITIZENS for Sanctuary* seeks to move away from the negative debates around asylum in the past few years and focus on the fact that the vast majority of people in the UK are in the centreground – they are proud of our tradition of providing sanctuary to people fleeing persecution, and want that commitment to continue in the long-term.

As a supporter of the campaign I would like to ask if you would be able to help by implementing a very simple recommendation yourself. The Independent Asylum Commission found that public support for sanctuary was falling and that drastic action was needed to win back public confidence. One major recommendation was that

*“The concept of sanctuary must be distinguished very clearly from economic migration, through avoiding the term ‘asylum’ and choosing appropriate and understood terminology.”* Independent Asylum Commission, *Saving Sanctuary* report

The Commission conducted the most detailed research into attitudes to sanctuary and asylum ever conducted in the UK and the results are startling. Only 18% of the population think that ‘asylum’ is a positive word and more people link the word with mental illness than with people fleeing from persecution. But the Commission also found strong support for the concept of sanctuary: over 66% of the population want the UK to provide sanctuary to people fleeing persecution. Moreover, when we used alternatives to the word ‘asylum’, people were much more supportive of the idea. For example, 85% of the public think that ‘sanctuary’ is a positive word. Not only do over half the population have somewhere they consider a sanctuary for themselves, but they also understand that it means providing a safe haven to people fleeing persecution.

One more thing to consider – 71% of the public thought the information they received from politicians and the media was not clear about the distinctions between the different groups of migrants. This is because politicians and journalists are using confusing and negatively-perceived terms such as ‘asylum’ and ‘asylum seeker’ to refer to people seeking sanctuary. As a leader in our community, you have a responsibility to think about how the words you use are understood.

That is why I would like you to take an important step to increase public support for sanctuary. I know that MPs are concerned about communicating clearly with their constituents and the public. Remember, that if you use the term ‘asylum’ when communicating with the public, although you may know what it means, more of your audience will be thinking about mental illness than people fleeing persecution.

- So I would like you to avoid using the term ‘asylum’ when you communicate with the public through letters, leaflets, newspaper columns, speeches, media interviews, on your website and any other campaign material.
- And it would be even better if you could substitute ‘sanctuary’ for ‘asylum’, ‘person seeking sanctuary’ for ‘asylum seeker’, and ‘person refused sanctuary’ for ‘refused/failed asylum seeker’.



I would be more than happy to provide further information or to meet you in person to discuss this in more detail.

I look forward to your reply.

### **Contacting your local newspaper**

The best way to start is to buy your local paper and find out who the editor is. If you want to check for contact details online then use the Media UK database: <http://www.mediauk.com>.

When you have the number, give them a call or send them an email explaining who you are and why you are contacting them. You might want to borrow or modify some of the text from the letter to the MP above.

- Ask them if their newspaper has a style guide and if they could send it to you.
- Identify whether the style guide has any reference to the use of the term 'asylum'.
- Seek a meeting to see if they would be willing to include guidance on sanctuary in the style guide.

### **Contacting your local council**

As above, identify your local authority using this Directory of Local Councils: <http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DI1/Directories/Localcouncils/index.htm>.

Find the contact details of the leader of the council or the person with responsibility for community cohesion. Then call them up and arrange a meeting or send a letter or email using a modified version of the MP template above.

Please let us know how you get on with these actions. We will collate all of the results from across the country and add them to our website so we can see all the change we have accomplished.

If you need advice or support, please contact [carina.crawford-rolt@cof.org.uk](mailto:carina.crawford-rolt@cof.org.uk).

Good luck!