



Guide for Engaging the Public with Researcher Immigration

September 2025

THE
social
AGENCY



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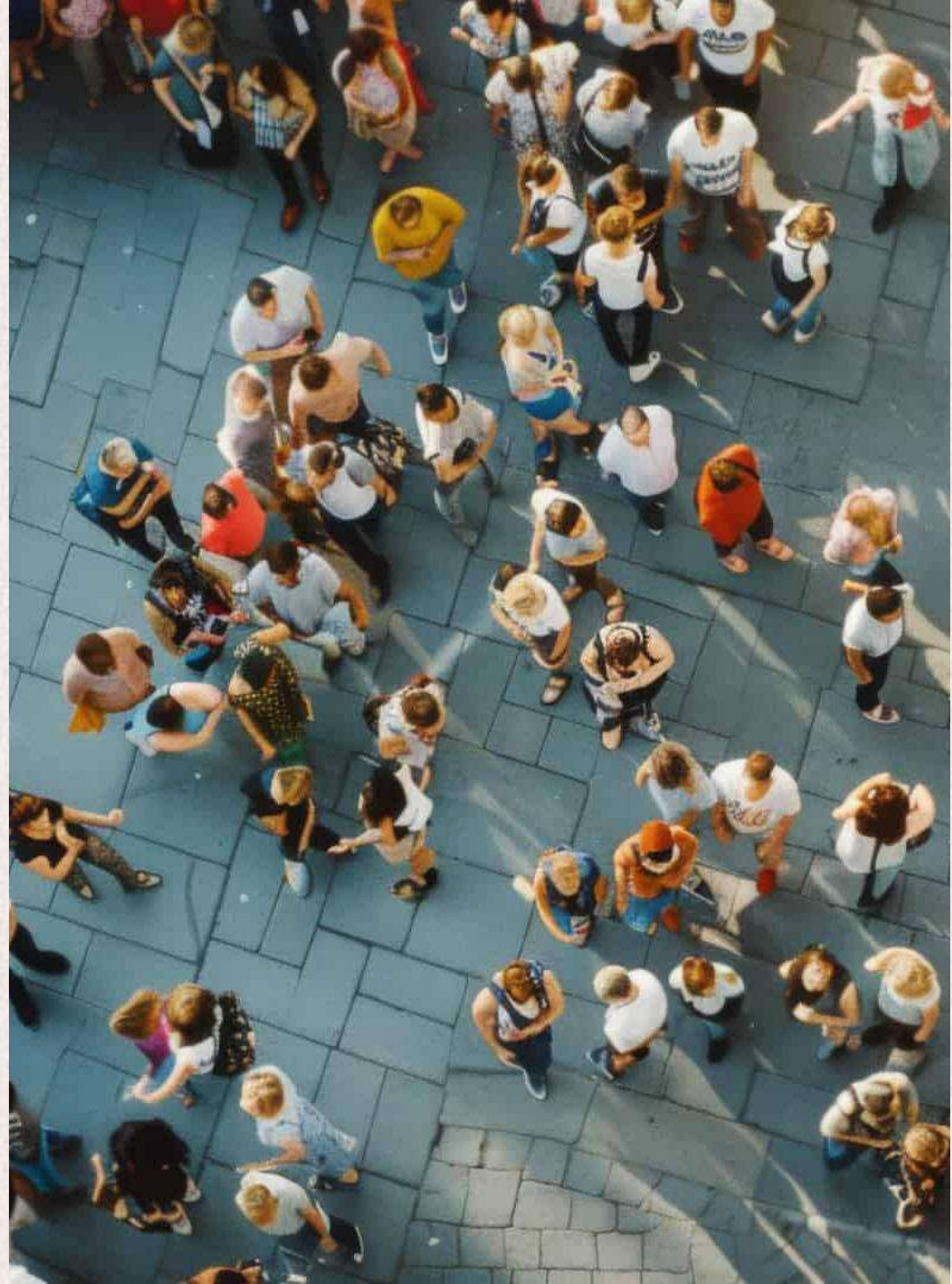


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1. Introduction



Background and Context

There is [substantial evidence](#) on the benefits of attracting international researchers to the UK's research and development (R&D) sector.

CaSE has been a vocal advocate on this issue with political audiences, but messaging from CaSE and the wider sector has struggled to cut through in the wider public debate around immigration.

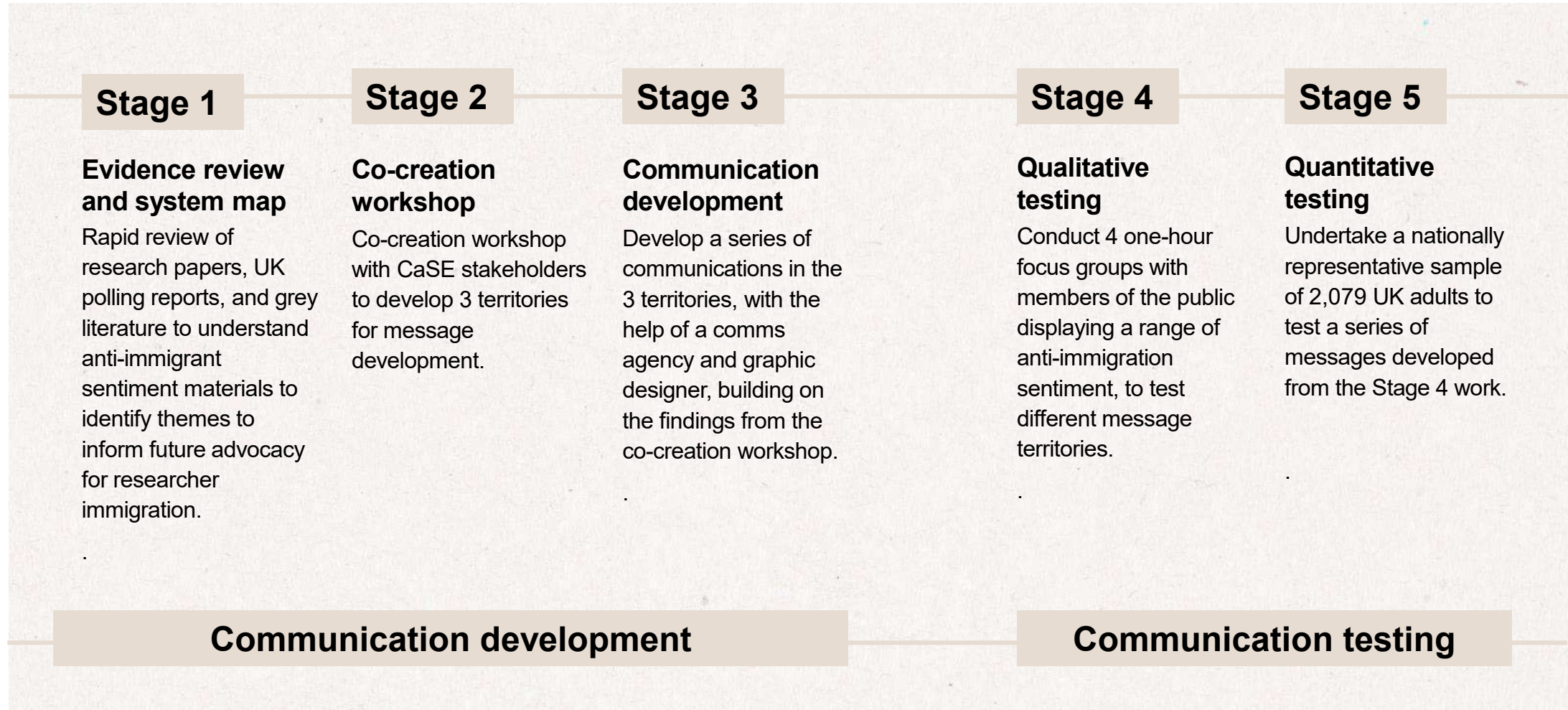
The Social Agency and Icaro were commissioned by CaSE to develop and test pro-immigration communications that are more emotionally resonant with the public – especially those with stronger anti-immigration views. This report presents the findings, showing how the public respond to communications on the immigration of researchers to the UK.

These insights will inform future campaigns and communication on this topic by CaSE, partner organisations and politicians to garner greater public support for researcher immigration.

Further information is [available on the CaSE website](#).



Method



Developing communications

The literature review identified several themes within the UK public's views and concerns on immigration, which were fed into a co-creation workshop with stakeholders from across the R&D sector.

This workshop informed the development of **three communication territories** to test with the public:

1. Bright ideas are everywhere, let's get them on our side

Focus: national and local pride, optimism, bringing ideas to Britain.

2. Britain is broken. Let's take back control of our future and fix it

Focus: nostalgia, addressing dissatisfaction and disillusionment.

3. Britain is under threat - we need to be strong to keep us safe

Focus: fear and protectionism, strong leadership, fixing problems.



Credit: The Social Agency

Qualitative public testing sample

Sample approach

The qualitative testing drew on a mixed sample size of 16 people. Prior research indicated that it was important to test the messages across age, gender, and anti-immigration sentiment groupings.

The level of anti-immigration sentiment was determined via five screening questions.

Participants were recruited in friendship pairs to allow them to feel more comfortable expressing their opinions.

Due to the sample size, not all combinations were tested, with previous evidence used to inform those chosen.

Focus groups each with 4x members of the public			
Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
4x Male	4x Female	4x Male	4x Female
4x Over 45+	4x Over 45+	4x 18-44	4x 18-44
Stronger anti-immigration sentiment	Moderate anti-immigration sentiment	Moderate anti-immigration sentiment	Stronger anti-immigration sentiment

2. Qualitative testing



02. Qualitative testing

Introduction to qualitative testing

For qualitative testing, three executions were drafted per territory.

The executions were mocked up to be:

- Static digital communications
- Static, out of home communications
- Video communications
- Audio communications

Each group was shown **three examples** drawn from **two territories**.

Participants shared their perspectives on the extent to which each communication performed against the following criteria:

- Understanding of main message
- Relevance
- Emotion and tone
- Appeal
- Cut through
- Impact

This section presents the findings from each territory in the following format:

First – headline findings are shown for each territory.

Second – each territory is rated against the performance criteria on a scorecard

Third – key takeaways are provided for how to optimise each territory.

High resolution images of each execution are [available on the CaSE website](#).

Territory 1: Bright ideas are everywhere, let's get them on our side

Focus: national and local pride, optimism, bringing ideas to Britain



Execution 1

A bus stop poster presenting researchers from abroad as key 'team players' needed for British R&D.



Execution 2

A video advertisement with audio in the style of football commentary, presenting researchers from abroad as part of a winning team. The advertisement ends with the tag line 'bright ideas are everywhere, lets bring them here'.



Execution 3

A social media advert comparing British R&D to the Premier League, making the argument that we want the 'best players' to join.

Territory 1 – Optimistic tone appreciated but football analogy loses interest



Headline

These executions used team sport and football analogies to convey the need to recruit the best 'players' to come to Britain.

Comprehension

Most participants understood these communications were about bringing in ideas from everywhere, collaboration, and building a great team of researchers. It used sport and football analogies to evoke feelings of pride for diverse thinking and demonstrate that international researchers can support homegrown talent. These analogies were universally understood but were more appealing to those that were football and sport fans.

Executions

The football analogy used in the TV advert and social media post resonated with football fans to a greater extent as they were better placed to draw useful parallels when thinking about R&D. Others found these analogies off-putting and felt it didn't match the seriousness of the topic of immigration.

Messaging territory scorecard: Territory 1

How the territories performed across different features as green (good), amber (average), and red (poor).



Comprehension: Message of teamwork was understood but those who didn't like football couldn't see the nuances.



Relevance: Those who weren't interested in football found it confusing and irrelevant, struggling to connect team sports to immigration and the R&D sector.



Emotion and tone: Participants enjoyed the sense of collaboration, but felt features such as the football-style commentary didn't match the seriousness of the message.



Appeal: Engaged those who liked football, but not those who disliked or had no interest in football.



Cut-through: Those without an interest in football felt it was forgettable and disengaged very quickly.



Impact: It helped those who liked football put a complex issue into familiar language, but it felt distasteful to others.



02. Qualitative testing

Key takeaway: Territory 1 - Bright ideas are everywhere, let's get them on our side

Execute the message in a way that will appeal to everyone and not those with select interests.

Steer away from the football metaphor and dial up ideas of collaboration and teamwork through an analogy which is universally appreciated.

“What about the hundreds of thousands, or millions, of people in the UK that have no interest in football? The advert's just pushed them completely to the side. They walked out of the room in the first two seconds.”

Male, 18-44, moderate anti-immigration sentiment



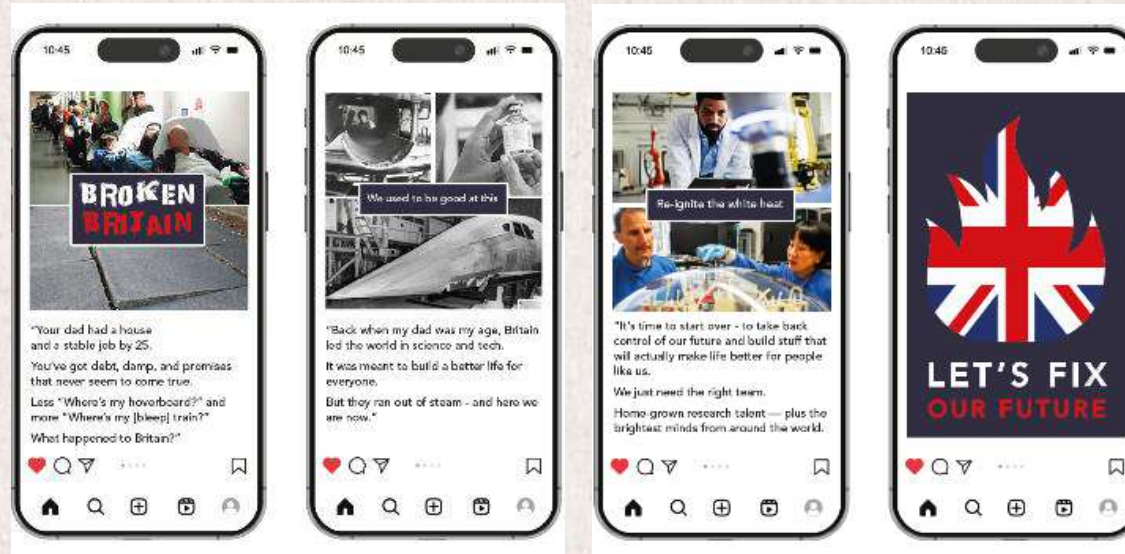
Territory 2: Britain is broken. Let's take back control of our future and fix it.

Focus: nostalgia, addressing dissatisfaction and disillusionment



Execution 1

A bus stop poster presenting researchers from abroad as important for bringing Britain back to the height of innovation.



Execution 2

A series of social media posts highlighting societal problems in the UK, and positioning research and development and overseas researchers as an important part of solving them.



Execution 3

A radio advert highlighting societal problems in the UK and historic UK innovation. It positions research and development and overseas researchers as an important part of bringing back national pride.

Territory 2 – Discontent with Britain resonated but messaging needs to be cautious not to over-state reliance on immigration.



Headline

This territory used themes of nostalgia and discontent with the state of Britain to connect with how the public perceive public life. It presented R&D as part of the solution to Britain's problems and positioned researcher immigration as part of the solution.

Comprehension

Participants recognised that the communications in this territory were about renewing past triumphs of British innovation in the modern day to fix a 'Broken Britain'. While participants understood that attracting global talent is important, they felt this should not be at the expense of investing in homegrown talent.

Executions

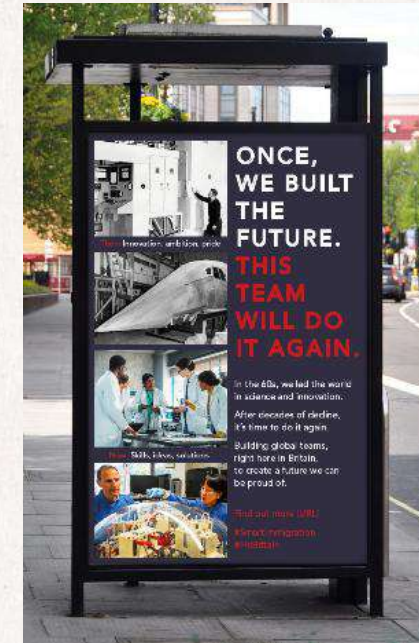
Participants felt that the message about immigration was "slipped in" at the end of executions two and three, which felt "snidey" and deceitful. Two examples used the phrase "reignite the white heat" (referencing Harold Wilson's 1963 speech on technology) which two groups misinterpreted as referencing skin colour, and felt the phrase had "white supremacy" undertones. One of the executions used the hashtag #smartimmigration, which participants felt reflected their preference for skilled migration as opposed to illegal migration and those seeking asylum.

02. Qualitative testing

Messaging territory scorecard: Territory 2

How the territories performed across different features as green (good), amber (average), and red (poor).

- Comprehension:** People connect with a need for British innovation to solve current problems and understood immigration could be part of the picture.
- Relevance:** All executions clearly reflect the concerns of ordinary people and a vision of past Britain that can resonate across generations.
- Emotion and tone:** The themes of the executions, such as discontent with the state of Britain, and nostalgia, felt relevant and resonated with participants.
- Appeal:** Some of the executions such as the social media post felt overly-patriotic at times, with the Union Jacks seeming like an attempt to appeal to “gammons”.
- Cut-through:** The messaging in all executions connected with people’s concerns about the UK, as well as their nostalgia for Britain of the past.
- Impact:** Participants accepted how executions framed the need for global talent but rejected being reliant on them; they want investment in homegrown talent.



02. Qualitative testing

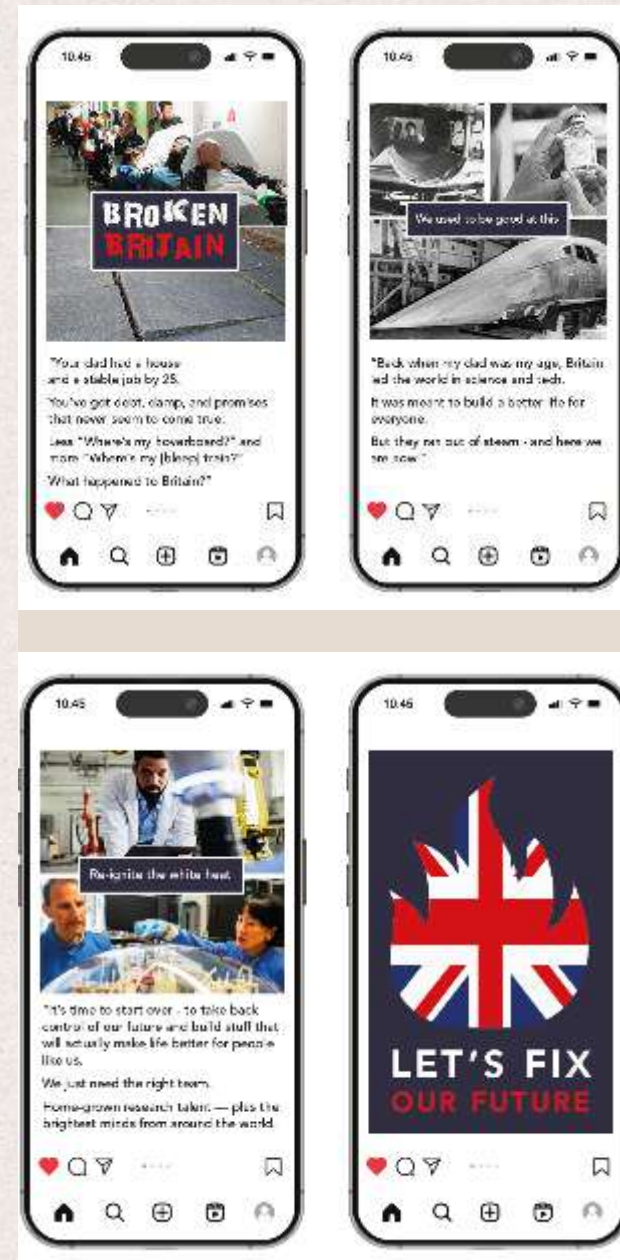
**Key takeaway: Territory 2 - Britain is broken.
Let's take back control of our future and fix it.**

Ensure the message taps into feelings and problems that people can relate to.

Be upfront and honest about intention of promoting immigration. It is important to strike a balance between the idea that Britain should invest in homegrown talent and recruit the best from abroad.

“We see it all day... every day. You go down your local high street... anywhere in the country and you see that Britain's broken.”

Male, 18-44, moderate anti-immigration sentiment



Territory 3: Britain is under threat - we need to be strong to keep us safe.

Focus: fear and protectionism, strong leadership, fixing problems



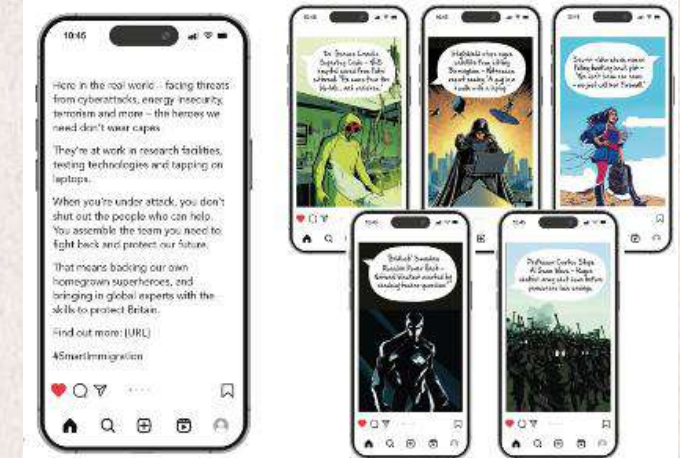
Execution 1

A bus stop poster presenting researchers from overseas as the 'heroes' needed to protect Britain.



Execution 2

A series of social media posts presenting researchers from abroad as critical to keeping Britain safe from emerging threats like cyberattacks, portraying them as superheroes.



Execution 3

A series of social media posts presenting researchers from abroad as critical to keeping Britain safe from emerging threats like cyberattacks, using a comic strip format and superhero personas.

02. Qualitative testing

Territory 3 – Message of Britain needing to be saved didn't land well, and executions felt patronising.



Headline

This territory used a superhero analogy, with the characters helping to keep Britain safe from threats to our security and wellbeing. It presented immigrant researchers as heroic figures, ready to help Britain fight various problems

Comprehension

Participants interpreted the message as saying that Britain is reliant on immigrants and needs them to save us from various threats. Participants felt this to be too pessimistic and neglected their desire to invest in homegrown talent, and that Britain was unable to solve its own problems.

Executions

Participants disliked the executions as comics, and of immigrant researchers as superheroes. In each of the three executions, the images came across as patronising, childish, and memorable for the wrong reasons. The emphasis on Britain being under threat and in need of saving was not appreciated, damaging participants' sense of national pride.

Messaging territory scorecard: Territory 3

How the territories performed across different features as green (good), amber (average), and red (poor).

- Comprehension:** Participants overwhelmingly disliked that executions presented Britain as threatened and in need of being saved by 'superhero' immigrants.
- Relevance:** Participants across the groups did not relate to the superhero theme of executions. It felt childish and patronising, and not relevant to immigration.
- Emotion and tone:** Executions were felt to be overly negative about Britain, evoking fear rather than optimism of improvement.
- Appeal:** Executions did not resonate with people or influence their views on immigration.
- Cut-through:** Memorable in that the executions referenced threats that were of genuine concern, but this was not appreciated.
- Impact:** Left an impression of Britain as overly-vulnerable, with discontent around immigrant researchers being the heroes instead of British talent.



02. Qualitative testing

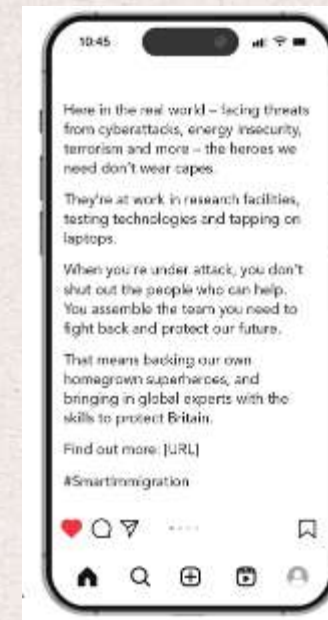
Key takeaway: Territory 3 - Britain is under threat - we need to be strong to keep us safe

Make it clear that Britain wants immigrant researchers but is not reliant on them.

Don't play so heavily on feelings of threat or fear, and present ideas in a way which reflects their seriousness. Be careful not to undermine Britain's pool of homegrown talent in which we should invest.

“[It says] we can't do it ourselves. When Britain is threatened, we've been bloody useless and we have to bring in people to help. We can't manage the situation ourselves... we haven't got the skill. [...] It's quite damning, really, isn't it?”

Female, 45+, moderate anti-immigration sentiment



Key findings from qualitative testing

Combined findings across the three territories:

1

Communications should be upfront about the topic of immigration.

2

Communications should distinguish between skilled immigration and other types of immigration.

3

Communications should demonstrate that researcher immigration will benefit people's local area.

4

Communications should not frame Britain (or the R&D sector) as overly-reliant on immigration.

02. Qualitative testing

Key findings from qualitative testing

Communications should be upfront about immigration.

Some communications framed immigration as a secondary part of the solution to a broader set of public concerns.

Participants saw this as “patronising” and felt like they were being tricked. Others felt that by not mentioning immigration until the end, the message and purpose was diluted and therefore confusing.

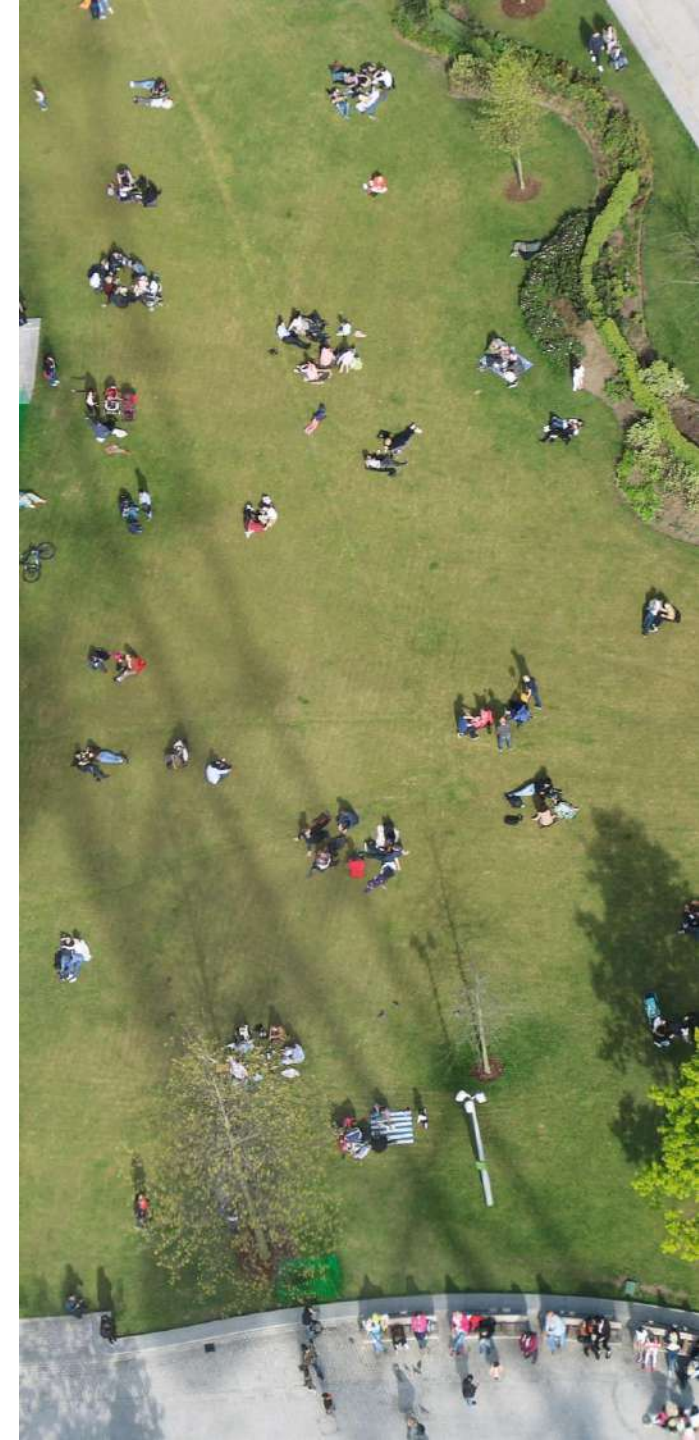
Participants emphasised their desire for communications to feel honest given the level of polarisation around the issue of immigration, and their inherent distrust in the establishment.

Distinguish between skilled immigration and other types of immigration.

The media often frames anti-immigration sentiment around narratives of asylum seekers and small boats. The literature review also suggested people are more receptive to the idea of skilled migration.

It is important to make this distinction when communicating about immigration in such a direct and upfront manner. This could help to remove the polarising effects of some of the broader debate.

For example, some participants found the use of the “#SmartImmigration” hashtag to be compelling and representative of the type of skilled immigration they favoured.



02. Qualitative testing

Key findings from qualitative testing

Demonstrate that this immigration will benefit their local area.

Participants' experiences of immigration in their local communities does not involve skilled migrants. It involves vulnerable people they perceive as "beggars" and "criminals", who they ultimately see as extractive to Britain.

In this context, participants struggled to see how skilled migrants would be visible to them or benefit their communities.

Therefore, communications which are locally framed, rather than nationally, might resonate with people more.

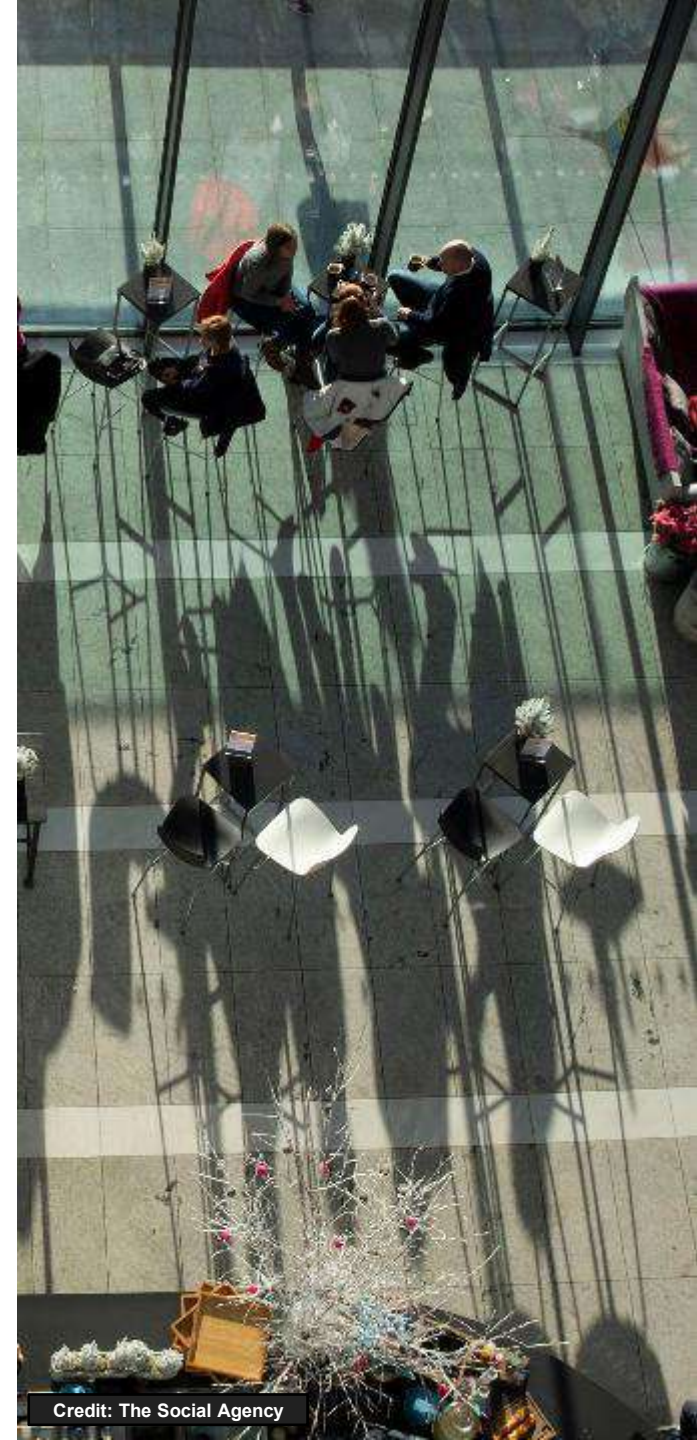
CaSE's wider work has explored [how to connect with the public on a local level](#).

Don't frame Britain (or the R&D sector) as reliant on immigration.

Participants rejected communications that suggested Britain is incapable of solving its own problems and dependent on immigrants.

They wanted more focus on investment in homegrown talent, which could then be supplemented by global talent.

Some participants wanted the communications to explicitly address how skilled immigrants could help British-born workers, for example, by training the next generation. That way, participants could understand how researcher immigration might have a tangible, positive impact on their children's lives.



Credit: The Social Agency

3. Quantitative testing



03. Quantitative testing

From qualitative message development to quantitative statement testing

Territory 2 (Britain is broken. Let's take back control of our future and fix it.) was the most successful in the qualitative testing and was taken forward for quantitative testing.

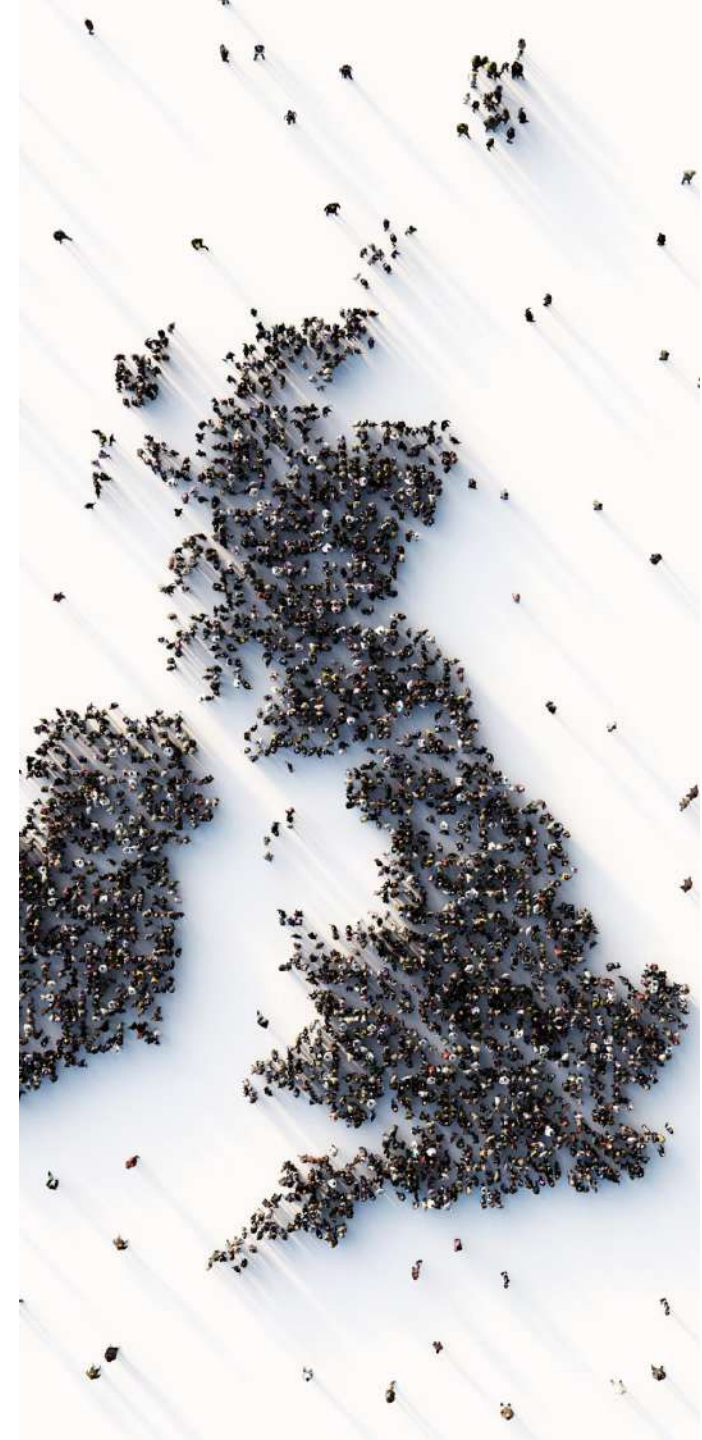
18 statements were drafted to test different message framings based on insights from the qualitative research.

The different framings were

- Whether the statement focused on local benefits (e.g. local job creation) or national benefits (e.g. the world's best innovation being developed and built in Britain).
- Whether the emotional hook for the statement related to nostalgia or whether it focused on discontent with contemporary Britain.

- Whether either international researchers or immigration were referenced at the start or end of the message, or not at all.
- Whether international researchers were framed as star players (world class researchers bringing unique benefits to Britain) or team players (people who strengthen the UK's domestic R&D workforce, helping the UK to be the best in the world).

Statements had to be brief and of roughly the same length to ensure these factors did not affect the results.



03. Quantitative testing

Introduction to quantitative testing

The 18 statements were tested with a nationally representative sample of 2,079 UK adults.

The survey was conducted online using Yonder Data Solutions proprietary market research panel. Quotas were set on region, age, gender, ethnicity and social economic grade to ensure the sample matched the profile of the UK population.

The testing comprised of four questions.

1. Selecting whether each statement is convincing or unconvincing
2. Ranking the memorability of the statement (selecting the most/least memorable)

3. Ranking the overall sentiment towards the statements (selecting the most/least liked)
4. Vote intention (to understand different reactions according to political outlook)

The first question used Implicit Testing to test unconscious responses (including emotion) in addition to their explicit answer. For this question speed of response was collected as a way of understanding emotional certainty in respondents' answers.



Credit: The Social Agency

03. Quantitative testing

Interpreting the results

The statements are not intended to be ready for immediate use in campaigns, and further refinement would be required before use in a real-world setting.

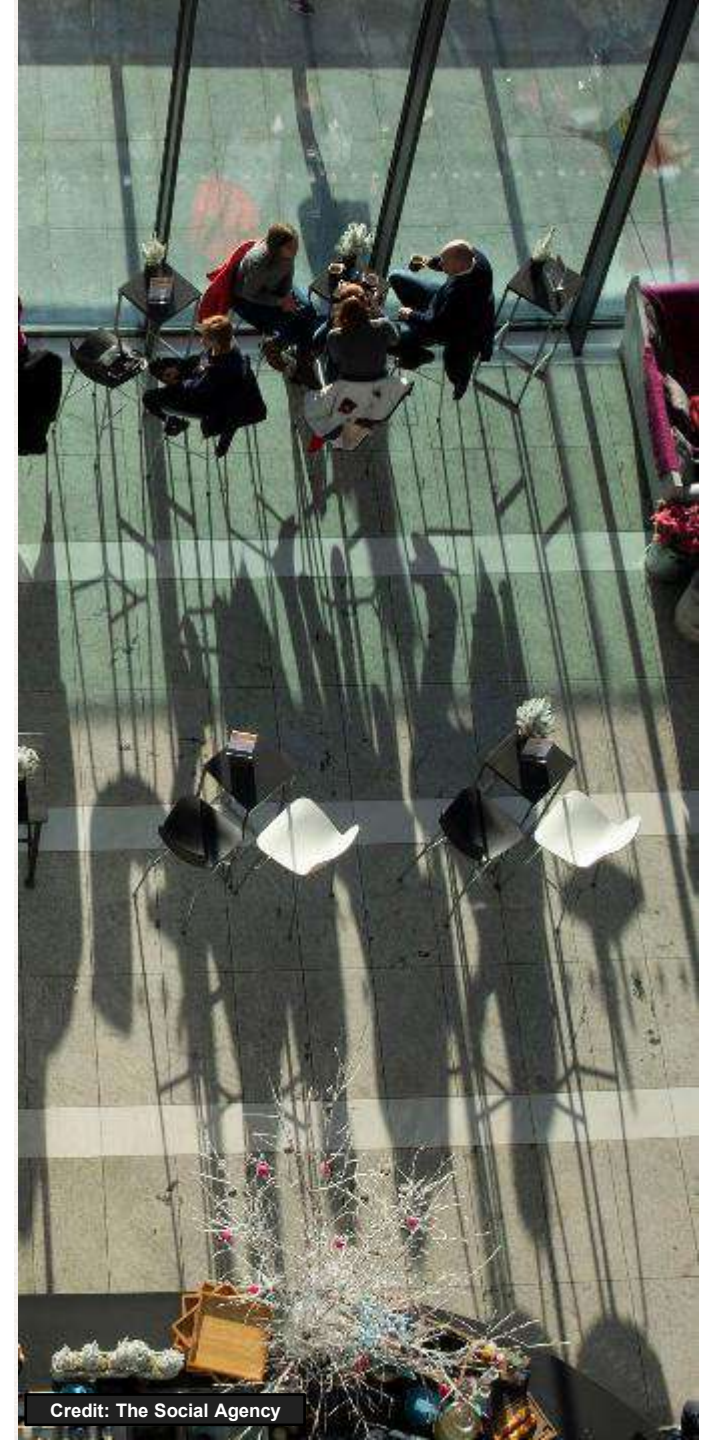
For the purposes of testing, statements were constrained within a range of 80-100 characters (and the analysis of the implicit testing adjusted for any minor deviations in length to ensure that longer statements – which could take longer to read – were not disadvantaged).

The statements were presented as written copy with no supporting imagery, to help understand the effectiveness of the statements without the influence of visual images.

It is also important to note that the performance of any single statement in the quantitative testing process is *not necessarily* a reflection on the wider ‘fixing broken Britain’ territory itself. It may be that different statements under the territory could be effective, even if the example statement was not.

It is more instructive to look at the broader performance of similar groups of statements, rather than looking for a “winner” or “loser”. The principles of what groups of statements convey is a more instructive output from this type of early quantitative testing.

Full results of the quantitative testing are [available on the CaSE website](#).

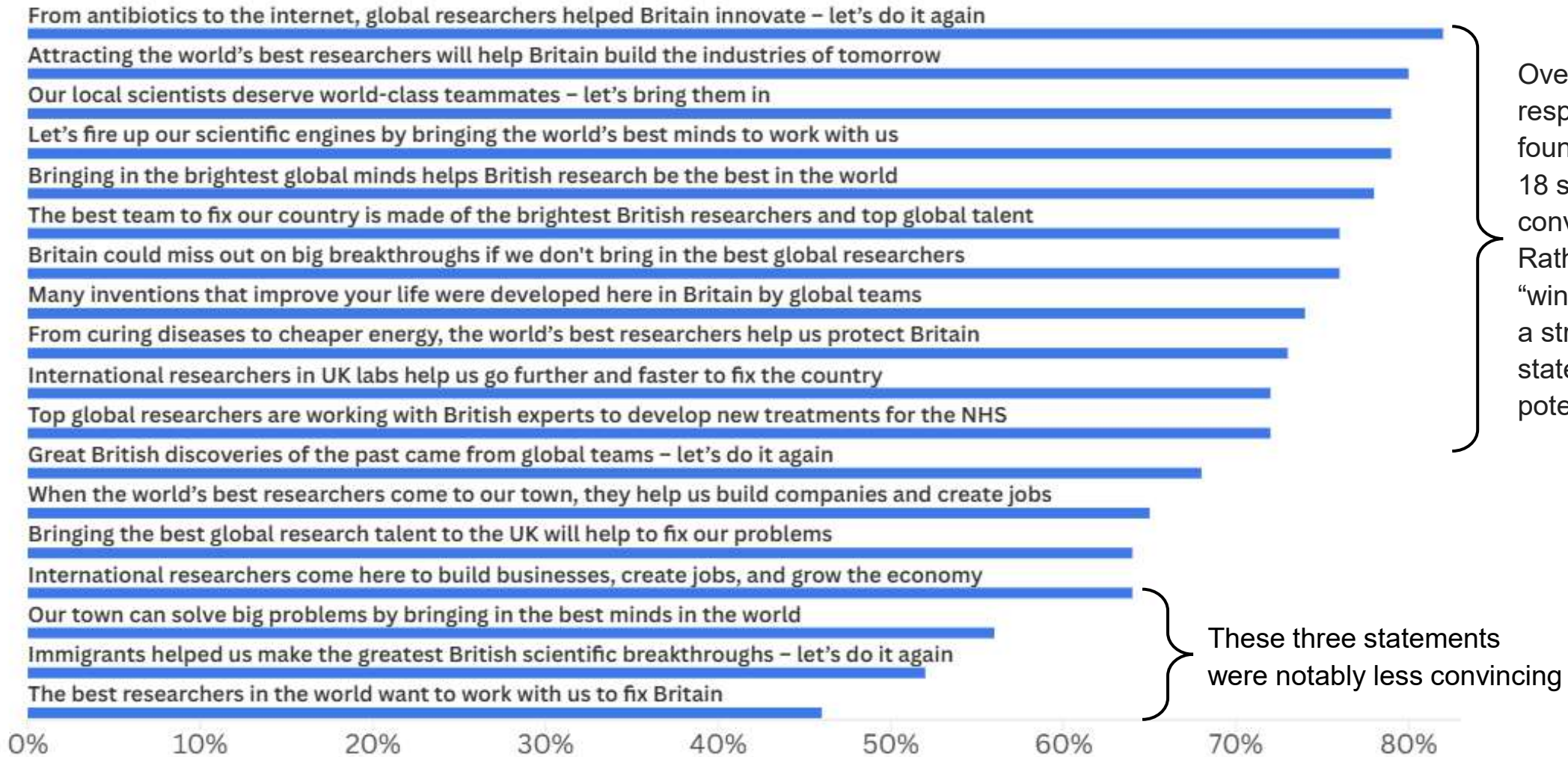


Credit: The Social Agency

03. Quantitative testing

Convincing vs unconvincing: explicit choice

This graph shows the percentage of respondents who rate each statement as “convincing”



Over 70% of respondents found 11 of the 18 statements convincing. Rather than “winners” there is a strong group of statements with potential

These three statements were notably less convincing

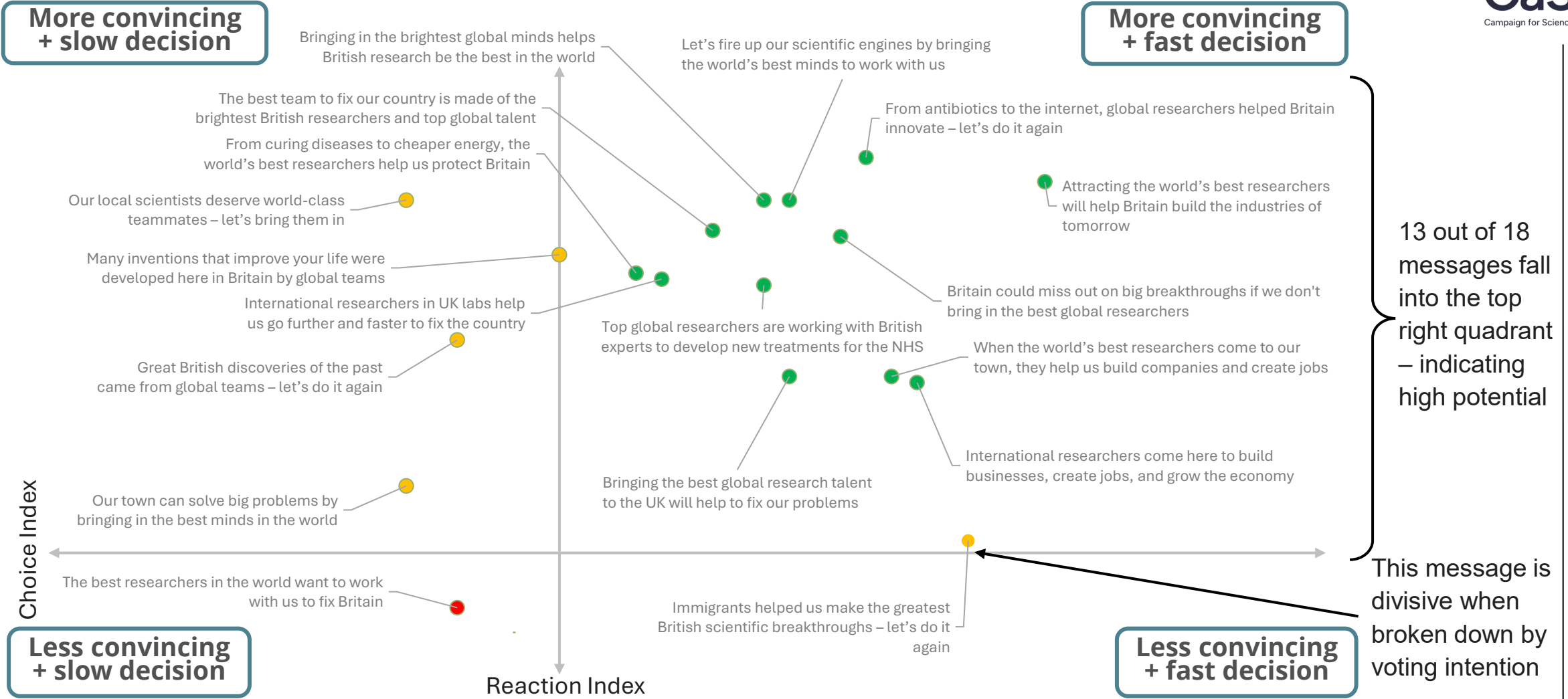
Source: Icaro polling for CaSE • August 2025

29 We are now going to show you 18 statements – one at a time. For each, tell us whether you feel the statement is convincing or unconvincing. n=2,079

04. Quantitative testing

Convincing vs unconvincing: implicit testing

How convincing is each message (Y-axis), and the speed taken to make that decision (X-axis), with the top-right quadrant being the best-performers.



Source: Icaro polling for CaSE • August 2025

We are now going to show you 18 statements – one at a time. For each, tell us whether you feel the statement is convincing or unconvincing. n=2,079

03. Quantitative testing

Performance by vote intention

Performance of each statement (deeper colour means more convincing) split by voting intention of respondents.

	Conservative (250)	Labour / LD / Green (775)	Reform (458)	Would not vote (252)
From antibiotics to the internet, global researchers helped Britain innovate – let’s do it again	83%	91%	69%	73%
Attracting the world’s best researchers will help Britain build the industries of tomorrow	81%	87%	70%	64%
Our local scientists deserve world-class teammates – let’s bring them in	85%	90%	71%	65%
Let’s fire up our scientific engines by bringing the world’s best minds to work with us	79%	83%	66%	69%
Bringing in the brightest global minds helps British research be the best in the world	83%	85%	65%	62%
The best team to fix our country is made of the brightest British researchers and top global talent	87%	80%	71%	62%
Britain could miss out on big breakthroughs if we don’t bring in the best global researchers	75%	87%	58%	67%
Many inventions that improve your life were developed here in Britain by global teams	85%	75%	70%	59%
From curing diseases to cheaper energy, the world’s best researchers help us protect Britain	76%	84%	61%	55%
International researchers in UK labs help us go further and faster to fix the country	66%	88%	63%	60%
Top global researchers are working with British experts to develop new treatments for the NHS	73%	81%	59%	54%
Great British discoveries of the past came from global teams – let’s do it again	70%	79%	46%	48%
When the world’s best researchers come to our town, they help us build companies and create jobs	61%	73%	43%	48%
Bringing the best global research talent to the UK will help to fix our problems	67%	74%	47%	55%
International researchers come here to build businesses, create jobs, and grow the economy	68%	75%	47%	59%
Our town can solve big problems by bringing in the best minds in the world	60%	61%	38%	52%
Immigrants helped us make the greatest British scientific breakthroughs – let’s do it again	42%	77%	24%	37%
The best researchers in the world want to work with us to fix Britain	54%	51%	43%	38%

- There are clear differences in how the statements perform by vote intention
- All the statements land – to some degree – among those who intend to vote centre left. Many also perform strongly among Conservative voters.
- While some statements resonate with Reform voters, traction is lower overall.
- Reform and Would Not Vote groups have similar responses.
- The most divisive statement is when the term ‘immigrant’ is used – it is positively received by the centre left but not by other groups.

Base: UK adults, 18-20 August 2025. NB. Base sizes in brackets

03. Quantitative testing

Messages most/least memorable and most/least liked

How frequently each statement was selected as one of the most / least memorable, or most liked / most disliked, statements.

	% most memorable	% least memorable	% most liked	% most disliked
From antibiotics to the internet, global researchers helped Britain innovate – let’s do it again	30%	6%	23%	3%
Attracting the world’s best researchers will help Britain build the industries of tomorrow	24%	6%	16%	3%
Top global researchers are working with British experts to develop new treatments for the NHS	24%	8%	20%	4%
From curing diseases to cheaper energy, the world’s best researchers help us protect Britain	23%	8%	17%	5%
Many inventions that improve your life were developed here in Britain by global teams	21%	8%	14%	4%
Bringing in the brightest global minds helps British research be the best in the world	20%	5%	15%	3%
Our local scientists deserve world-class teammates – let’s bring them in	20%	12%	13%	7%
Great British discoveries of the past came from global teams – let’s do it again	19%	10%	15%	6%
The best team to fix our country is made of the brightest British researchers and top global talent	19%	8%	15%	5%
Britain could miss out on big breakthroughs if we don't bring in the best global researchers	18%	11%	11%	9%
Immigrants helped us make the greatest British scientific breakthroughs – let’s do it again	17%	23%	15%	27%
Let’s fire up our scientific engines by bringing the world’s best minds to work with us	17%	12%	12%	8%
International researchers come here to build businesses, create jobs, and grow the economy	12%	12%	9%	7%
International researchers in UK labs help us go further and faster to fix the country	12%	10%	7%	7%
Bringing the best global research talent to the UK will help to fix our problems	12%	11%	8%	7%
The best researchers in the world want to work with us to fix Britain	9%	21%	8%	12%
When the world’s best researchers come to our town, they help us build companies and create jobs	7%	17%	5%	10%
Our town can solve big problems by bringing in the best minds in the world	6%	30%	5%	20%

Base: UK adults, 18-20 August 2025. NB. Base sizes in brackets

03. Quantitative testing

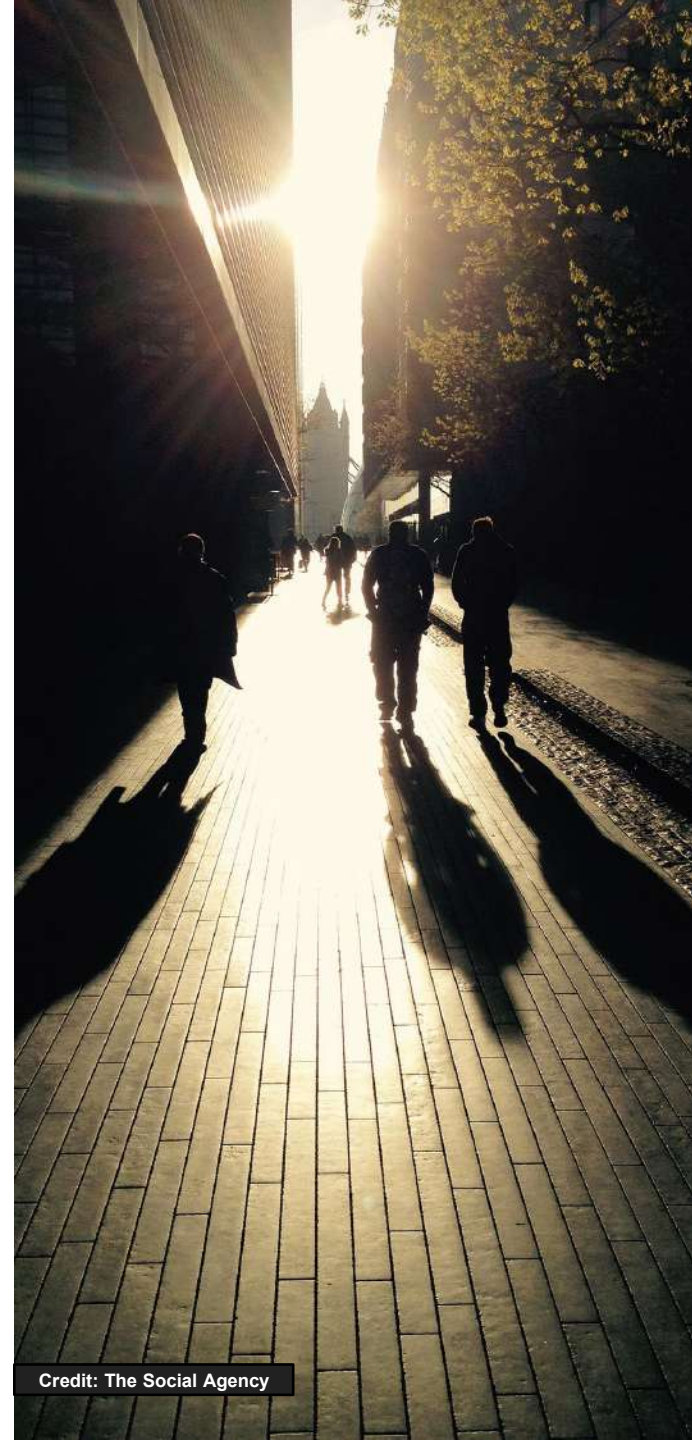
Key findings from quantitative testing

Many of the messaging concepts show promise, but further optimisation is required to identify the most effective choices.

However, it is possible to infer key principles regarding the elements and angles which make messages more effective with different audiences.

The best performing messages:

- **Pointed to specific R&D innovations rather than using nebulous phrases such as "fixing problems"**, e.g. *From antibiotics to the internet, global researchers helped Britain innovate*
- **Evoked a sense of optimism for the future**, e.g. *Attracting the world's best researchers will help Britain build the industries of tomorrow.*
- **Pointed to Britain's past achievements**, e.g. *Many inventions that improve your life were developed here in Britain by global teams.*
- **Highlighted the importance of home-grown talent**, e.g. *The best team to fix our country is made of the brightest British researchers and top global talent.*
- **Triggered loss aversion**, e.g. *Britain could miss out on big breakthroughs if we don't bring in the best global researchers".*



Credit: The Social Agency

03. Quantitative testing

Key findings from quantitative testing

Some statements were less effective, such as those presenting Britain as passive or weak.

The statement "The best researchers in the world want to work with us to fix Britain" proved the least convincing, potentially due to it casting the country as weak, passive and reliant on help.

Messages which mentioned 'local scientists' or 'our town' also performed less well, but this may be a result of the message design rather than the premise.

Vote intention and political outlook have a significant bearing on how statements are received.

The language of "global" plays well with potential Conservative and Reform voters, e.g. "Many inventions that improve your life were developed here in Britain by global teams". As does focusing on the homegrown talent.

By contrast, mentioning 'immigration' is very well received by a centre-left audience, but less so with other voter groups.



4. Conclusions and implications



04. Conclusion and implications

Principles for those championing researcher immigration

1. **Be clear:** ensure people understand that the message is about attracting the best overseas talent to the UK and avoid analogies
2. **Be balanced:** highlight the benefits of attracting overseas talent for the Britain and British workers, and avoid implying a reliance on immigration
3. **Be inspiring:** the best performing statements talked in positive terms about 'building', 'deserving', 'firing up' and 'doing it again' and not about 'problems'
4. **Be local:** people struggle to see the how researcher immigration improves their daily lives, but local examples can help cut through
5. **Be specific:** give examples of innovation like antibiotics and the internet, instead of talking about it in general terms
6. **Be mindful of language:** either avoid using the word 'immigration' in messaging or distinguish it from other forms of immigration (e.g. #smartimmigration)
7. **Be consistent:** align on one idea and speak with one voice as a sector - individual executions should always lead back to the big idea





For further information please contact:

rebecca@sciencecampaign.org.uk | www.sciencecampaign.org.uk



G06 Gloucester Building
City St George's, University Of London
EC1V 0HB



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This work was supported by Wellcome [318810/Z/24/Z]