

Messaging advice

for people advocating for the implementation
of the recommendations from the RCOI





Content Warning:

This information discusses abuse in care and may be distressing.

Abuse is when someone treats you badly or hurts you.
It might be someone you know or a stranger.

If you are worried or concerned after reading this document,
talk about it with someone you trust, for example:

- Friend or family
- Support worker
- Counsellor

Links to Helplines for someone to talk to are available on
this webpage.

**If you are still worried or do not
feel safe you can call the police:**

Phone: 111 if you need help straight away

Phone: 105 if you need the police and you do not need help straight away.

What this guide is and who it's for

This guide contains messaging advice for people who want to talk about acting on the recommendations from the Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCOI) into abuse in care. It is based on research conducted by Te Kāhui Tika Tangata Human Rights Commission in 2025. You can find out more about our work advocating for the survivors of abuse in care on our website.

The advice contained in this guide focuses on **framing** messages about the issue of abuse in care in ways that will help people to understand what the RCOI did and why implementing its recommendations is the responsible way to address the wrongs of the past and move forward as a society.

Framing' describes the choices we make about how to communicate on an issue. When communicators use strategic framing consistently, it can empower the public to imagine, advocate for, and actively support human rights.i

This guide is for anyone who wants to advocate for justice for the survivors of abuse in care, explain the work of the RCOI and the significance of its findings in ways that people can use and understand, or help people imagine what a better system would mean for everyone living in our communities, now and in the future.



How we arrived at our advice

Our research aimed to find out how to communicate effectively about this issue, based on how people in Aotearoa New Zealand think about the RCOI and its findings on abuse in state- and faith-based care, the problem of abuse in care, and the best solutions to this problem.

Our research consisted of:

- literature review of research on how to communicate about systemic abuse, accountability for abuse, survivor voices and autonomy, Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and the impacts of abuse in care on specific populations;
- a segmentation analysis of the survey data, to help us understand the extent to which respondents were likely to support, oppose, or be persuadable on the issue of abuse in care and the work of the Royal Commission of Inquiry;
- a survey, conducted with a representative sample of 1,045 adults resident in New Zealand by Horizon Research on behalf of Te Kāhui Tika Tangata. The survey data was analysed to understand how much people knew about the RCOI and what it revealed about abuse in care, their opinions and views about responsibility for abuse in care, and their views on values and justice in Aotearoa New Zealand in general;
- three one-hour focus groups with members of the public without direct experience of abuse in care, focused on how they thought and reasoned about implementing the recommendations of the RCOI, how much information they needed to feel confident that they understood the issue, and how they responded to new ways to explain the problem of abuse in care and the solutions offered by the RCOI's work
- 10 half-hour interviews with members of the public without direct experience of abuse in care, focused on participants' understanding of the work of the RCOI and its recommendations, their attitudes toward government and expert bodies' responsibility and accountability, and what they felt would work to address the problems revealed by the RCOI in practical ways;



If you want to call for the government to take action

What to do

Use your messages to frame this issue as cross- party

How to do it

Release messaging that applies to all elected representatives. Do it soon.

Why do it this way?

In our research, we heard that people wanted to see agreement on this issue across political lines. We also found that the issue is not yet politicised. This creates an opportunity for advocates to shape the narrative before it hardens along party lines without alienating likely supporters.

What this sounds like:

Rather than: “The coalition government needs to take action...”

Try: “No matter who is in government, it is important for the public to see action...”

If you want to call for the government to take action

What to do

Make taking action on the recommendations the responsible, pragmatic thing for our government to do:

- because this is what good government looks like
- because the Inquiry process was thorough and rigorous

How to do it

Emphasise that our government's job is making responsible choices on our behalf and help people see that the RCOI was a thorough, rigorous process, backed by survivors.

Why do it this way?

It's easy for people to presume that responsible government means spending less money, but that's not the only way we think about the role of our elected representatives. Advocates can reclaim the values of responsibility and pragmatism by emphasising that the inquiry was thorough and rigorous and shaped by survivor testimony throughout. We heard that at a minimum people believe that our government needs to take clear and transparent action on the recommendations, and soon.

What this sounds like:

Rather than: “If we don't pay for the abuse that happened, we'll just pay more for it later.”

Try: “The RCOI worked for 6 years and heard from thousands of survivors of abuse before making their recommendations. It's time we saw the government take action on those recommendations: that's the responsible thing to do.”

If you want to advocate for implementing all the recommendations as a package

What to do

Explain that the recommendations are a whole that has three parts:

- Addressing the wrongs of the past
- Making the current care system safe
- Empowering people in care, their whānau, and their communities

How to do it

Take the opportunity to frame the recommendations as a ‘package’ and use the three areas to give people a sense of their scope across past, present and future.

Why do it this way?

The RCOI made a lot of recommendations. Talking about them individually or emphasising the number can feel overwhelming. Most people come to this topic with very little knowledge either of the Commission or of abuse in care. If they’re asked to choose between the recommendations, they’ll probably resort to simple fixes. On the other hand, we saw clear agreement for all three areas covered by the recommendations. Most people thought they were sensible and reasonable and couldn’t name one area that was ‘less important’ than the others.

What this sounds like:

Rather than: “The RCOI released over 200 recommendations”

Try: “The RCOI delivered a package of recommendations covering three areas for action...”

You could describe the areas, or if you have less space try “addressing the past, the present, and the future of our care system.”

If you want to help people feel empowered to act

What to do

Emphasise that this issue is both significant now, and solvable.

How to do it

Try to provide enough details so the abuse becomes real for people without being sensationalist. Explaining that historical abuse happened in local places we all rely on— like schools or hospitals — helps people understand that it is something that affects people in their communities. It may be better to name places than the people who committed abuse, because that helps us understand that abuse doesn't just happen because of 'bad individuals.'

Always couple this with showing people a pathway to act. Naming prior community action helps. Likewise, using relatable and trustworthy messengers to speak on your behalf — like survivors from different backgrounds, people who are recognisable (such as parents or teachers), or people with status in their communities (for example, sports coaches or pastors) — helps us see that this is an issue that 'people like me' take action on.

Why do it this way?

People can have a very narrow frame for imagining what abuse means and who it affects. Many people also quickly feel fatalistic and disengaged when faced with long-term, systemic harm. They might presume that abuse is unavoidable, that it was a problem in the past but not for us today, or that it's just too difficult to take action on this issue.

Describing the effects of abuse on people in relatable ways reminds people that it does have relevance to their lives. Following up with solutions helps people to feel more capable of taking action. Showing that other people do care about the abuse and want to take action on the issue encourages us to feel that change is possible.

What this sounds like:

Rather than: “The RCOI identified rampant abuse across a range of care settings. We need to deliver justice for survivors of abuse.”

Try: “Children and babies were left without hugs or any affection, and young people and adults were beaten and sexually abused in places where they should have been safe. We need to come together to ask the government to implement the recommendations of the RCOI so that this never happens again.”

If you want to talk about justice for survivors

What to do

Try talking about government responsibility and pragmatism instead of talking only about justice for survivors

How to do it

Name what justice means in practical terms and remind people that our government has a responsibility to make good choices and care for the people in our communities.

Why do it this way?

We found that when we talked about taking action on the RCOI's recommendations in terms of 'responsibility' and pragmatism (doing what is practical and right) this was more effective than talking about 'justice.' Justice can mean very different things to different people. In the people we engaged with, it surfaced a strong association with the 'justice system.' If you want to talk about justice, make sure that you define what you mean.

What this sounds like:

Rather than: "The government needs to deliver justice for the survivors of abuse in care."

Try: "Survivors and communities came together to call for the establishment of the Royal Commission of Inquiry. Now, it is time for all of us to stand together and call on the government to implement its recommendations. That is the responsible, sensible thing for them to do."

If you want to help people understand that abuse came from our systems rather than a few ‘bad apples’

What to do

Use metaphors as a shortcut to explain systems:

- how bad systems lead to abuse, and
- how the government has a role in creating safe systems for future wellbeing

How to do it

Name what justice means in practical terms and remind people that our government has a responsibility to make good choices and care for the people in our communities.

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What this sounds like:

To explain the systems that allowed abuse to happen:

Rather than: “People in positions of power let us down.”

Try: “Abuse in our care system was swept aside or swept under the carpet, although many people knew about it.”

Rather than: “Abuse in care was widespread and systemic”

Try: “Abuse was built into the foundations of our care system: we need to rebuild our systems to make them safe and ensure this never happens again.”

To explain why people who have experienced abuse may have difficulties later in life:

Rather than: “People who have experienced abuse suffer from long-term and even intergenerational harm”

Try: “People who have experienced abuse can become overloaded with stress, making it difficult for them to participate in their community, care for their children, or hold down a job. We can help by offloading some of the stress they experience.”

If you want to use facts and statistics to support your advocacy

What to do

Offer facts and statistics carefully, in context, and in relatable ways

How to do it

Tell a story using facts and choose your facts carefully for maximum impact.

Why do it this way?

Simply providing more facts won't help people understand the issue any better, especially if those facts are not put in the context of a larger story. We found that using key statistics in context was very effective for the people we talked with. It gave them enough information to make sense of the issue quickly, even if they knew very little about it before.

What this sounds like:

Rather than: “Many, many people — up to 200,000 — were abused in care”
Try: “The RCOI learned that up to 200,000 people were abused in care in the years covered by their inquiry. That means about 1 in every 3 people put into care in that time period were abused”

Rather than: “We recommend that the government implement all of the 207 recommendations that the RCOI delivered.”

Try: “The RCOI worked together for 6 years to arrive at their recommendations. So far, the government has fully accepted just under 10% of them.”

How to use an effective message structure

Using a ‘values-problem-explanation-solution’ structure is an evidence-based way help people see and understand a path forward, even for very complex issues. Opening your message with a shared value creates a connection with your reader before you explain the problem that stops that value from being realised. It’s important to fill in the gaps for readers by explaining how the problem came about, who is responsible, what impact it has, and what we can do to fix it. This structure can be used to explain all kinds of problems and solutions.



Here, we have focused on explaining that abuse comes from flawed systems, and that our government has the responsibility to make sure our systems are safe for us all.

Value

Part of every government’s job is to make sure that our schools, hospitals, and care facilities are safe and trustworthy for everyone who uses them.

Problem

However, the Royal Commission of Inquiry into abuse in care has shown us that over many years abuse was built deep into the foundations of our care system. Successive governments made decisions that allowed this to happen. They laid the groundwork for systems that failed people who should have been safe.

Explanation

Through the Royal Commission’s work, we’ve learned that between 1950 and 1999, up to 200,000 people were abused in our schools, hospitals, and care facilities. That’s about one in every three people who were in care during that time. Children and babies were left alone for long periods without hugs or any affection. Young people and adults were beaten, sexually abused, and denied food, water, and basic privacy. Deaf and disabled people were locked away and prevented from communicating with other people, and Māori and Pacific peoples were singled out and treated even more harshly because of their ethnicity.

Abuse like that has a long-lasting and profound impact on a person’s life. People’s capacity to trust others, to participate in work, to make a home, and to deal with setbacks are all compromised by the experience of abuse in places where they should have been safe. In turn, the harm that they experienced ripples out through families and communities over generations.

Solution

We rely on our government to make good choices that will help keep people in care safe and allow them to move on to good lives. The work by the Royal Commission shows our elected representatives how they can make responsible changes that will help rebuild trust and confidence in our care system. No matter who is in government, accepting the recommendations from the Royal Commission of Inquiry is the right thing to do.

