

Campaigning during coronavirus

Lessons from UK civil society



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Authors: Rosemary Forest and Rowan Popplewell

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Contents

Section	Page	Section	Page
1 Introduction	4	4 What we have learned about campaigning during the pandemic	18
2 Why civil society campaigning is important	6	What the pandemic teaches us about the benefits of campaigning to society	18
3 Case studies of successful campaigns during coronavirus	7	What campaigners have learned during the pandemic	19
Trades Union Congress: Winning furlough	8	5 Challenges to civil society campaigning	21
Living Streets: Supporting safer walking and cycling	9	Impacts of the pandemic on campaigning	21
People's Vaccine Alliance: People's Vaccine	10	Pre-existing political, legal and regulatory constraints	22
Women's Aid Federation of England: Funding for domestic abuse support services	11	Emerging constraints	23
Anti-Tribalism Movement: Building awareness of the impact of Covid-19 on people of colour (with a focus on British Somalis)	12	6 Campaigning after coronavirus	25
Shelter: Evictions ban	13	A framework to protect the right to campaign	26
Pregnant Then Screwed: But not maternity	14	End notes	27
Joseph Rowntree Foundation: Uplift of Universal Credit	15		
Liberty: Scrap the Act	16		
Ubele Initiative: We Need Answers	17		

1 Introduction

In June 2020, the footballer Marcus Rashford and the food redistribution charity FareShare carried out one of the most high-profile campaigns of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic. Together, they persuaded the UK government to provide free school meals for 1.3 million children in England. Drawing on his own experience of receiving free school meals as a child and highlighting the stories of thousands of families who have struggled to put food on the table because of Covid-19, Rashford galvanised supporters across the political spectrum and among the public.

This is not the only campaign that successfully shaped the response to Covid-19 in the UK. Working hand-in-hand with people affected by the pandemic, civil society groups have highlighted problems faced by different communities – from the prospect of mass job losses to the trauma pregnant women have experienced because of birthing restrictions – and presented more effective, inclusive and compassionate solutions. In the course of this vital work, campaigners have engaged with the media to raise awareness of emerging issues, helped local and national government meet needs on an unprecedented scale, and supported parliamentarians from all political parties to hold ministers and civil servants to account. In doing so, campaigners today are building on a long tradition stretching back over a century.

Through campaigning, civil society ensures collective experiences and the views of ordinary people influence political and policy decisions, enables people to participate in efforts to bring about social change, and supports them to hold those in power accountable.

Civil society is fundamental to democracy and social change

Civil society campaigning has been the driving force behind many of society's greatest reforms, from votes for women to equal marriage. It has contributed to policy and legislative changes that have saved and improved lives. It is also a fundamental part of our democracy. Through campaigning, civil society ensures collective experiences and the views of ordinary people influence political and policy decisions, enables people to participate in efforts to bring about social change, and supports them to hold those in power accountable.

Despite the public benefit that results from campaigning, many campaigners have until now struggled to engage with government ministers, civil servants and parliamentarians. Over the years, indifferent

and even hostile attitudes among some decision makers have translated into a host of restrictions on what campaigners can say and do. While these attitudes will persist among some individuals and groups intent on preventing social change and preserving the status quo (there is always someone who will say Marcus Rashford should focus on football rather than speaking out on poverty) the exceptional circumstances brought about by the pandemic have demonstrated the necessity of speaking out.

Ten successful campaigns during coronavirus

At the beginning of the pandemic, decision makers faced with unprecedented challenges recognised the value of bringing in insights and ideas from outside the government. With roots in communities and connections with people with lived experience, from renters facing eviction to care home residents being cut off from all social contact, civil society groups were ideally placed to highlight issues with the initial response and work with Westminster, local authorities and institutions such as the NHS to find workable solutions. A great example of this is the Everyone In scheme. Housing and homelessness charities highlighted the perilous situation facing rough sleepers at the beginning of the pandemic and worked with the government to develop the initiative that provided emergency hotel accommodation for 15,000 people. This scheme is credited with saving thousands of lives during the first lockdown.¹

This report looks in detail at a selection of successful campaigns launched during the first year of the pandemic, from March 2020 to April 2021, and examines how they shaped responses to Covid-19 in the UK for the better. In doing so, it proves the important contribution campaigning has made during the crisis and how it has benefited the British people at a time of great need and suffering. The report presents ten case studies on campaigns that sought to improve the Covid-19 response. They show how different groups of people and organisations came together to raise awareness and make a tangible difference to people's lives. These

include trade unions working with a Conservative chancellor to establish the furlough scheme that protected 11 million jobs, community groups campaigning for an inquiry into the unequal impacts of Covid-19 on people of colour, and people around the country seeking to make their local areas safer for walking and cycling at a time when they were unable to travel further afield.

Restrictions and trends undermining campaigning

The second part of the report looks at the political and operating environment within which these campaigns took place and makes the case for a new framework that better protects the right to campaign in the UK. While the pandemic presented campaigners with many challenges, from moving online to surviving funding cuts, it has also revealed the power and benefit of campaigning. However, many campaigners who were brought in by the government in the early days of the pandemic and made an invaluable contribution to the UK response struggled to engage with the government in later months.

Rather than recognising the important support campaigners provided in the pandemic response over the last year, the UK government is moving ahead with plans to place greater restrictions on the right to protest – as part of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill – and limit access to judicial review – an important check on the government. As we enter the second year of the pandemic, we call on the government and parliamentarians to recognise the contribution campaigners have made to the UK response to Covid-19 so far by resetting the relationship between civil society and decision makers and protecting the right to campaign.

2 Why civil society campaigning is important

Civil society refers to the space where people come together to take collective action or advance shared interests. It includes registered charities and non-profit organisations, trade unions and labour organisations, media institutions and journalists, human rights defenders and whistle-blowers, disabled people's organisations, protest groups and movements, as well as clubs and associations. Civil society may seek to raise public awareness or mobilise support for an issue, change public attitudes and behaviour, influence legislation or change government policy. This could be through informal means, such as online activism, public gatherings, protest movements and social networks, or more formal structures, like organisations and coalitions. These activities may all be called campaigning.

Among the reforms that have been brought about or aided by civil society campaigning are the introduction of seatbelts, the smoking ban, the plastic bag tax, debt relief for the world's poorest nations, and the legalisation of same-sex relationships and equal marriage.² At its heart, campaigning is about people coming together to raise their collective voice and push for change they believe will improve their lives and the lives of others.

Campaigning is central to our democracy, making policy processes more effective and inclusive and holding decision makers to account. By bringing in different perspectives, civil society provides decision makers with access to valuable insights. It also brings expert experience and robust evidence that can be used to improve public policy and the

delivery of much needed services. Campaigners often work with communities and people with lived experiences who have a unique understanding and knowledge of the problems affecting their lives, helping to ensure their insights are taken into account in decision-making processes.

Campaigners working in or with communities that have been disproportionately affected by Covid-19 are well placed to identify systematic problems and solutions. This is particularly important for people less well-served by existing institutions. For example, advocates with direct lived experience have been vital to the success of campaigning for the rights of disabled people during the pandemic, opposing the blanket application of Do Not Resuscitate orders and pushing for vaccine prioritisation.³ Through their outspoken leadership, they challenged the stereotypes about disabled people that underpin and cause such harmful policies and practices.

As we enter the second year of the pandemic, the need for campaigning continues, as the way the crisis affects people changes and evolves. According to a survey by the Shelia McKechnie Foundation (SMK):

54% of campaigners believe the pandemic has increased the priority of campaigning for their organisation.

98% think there will be a need for more campaigning by civil society in the next 12 months.⁴

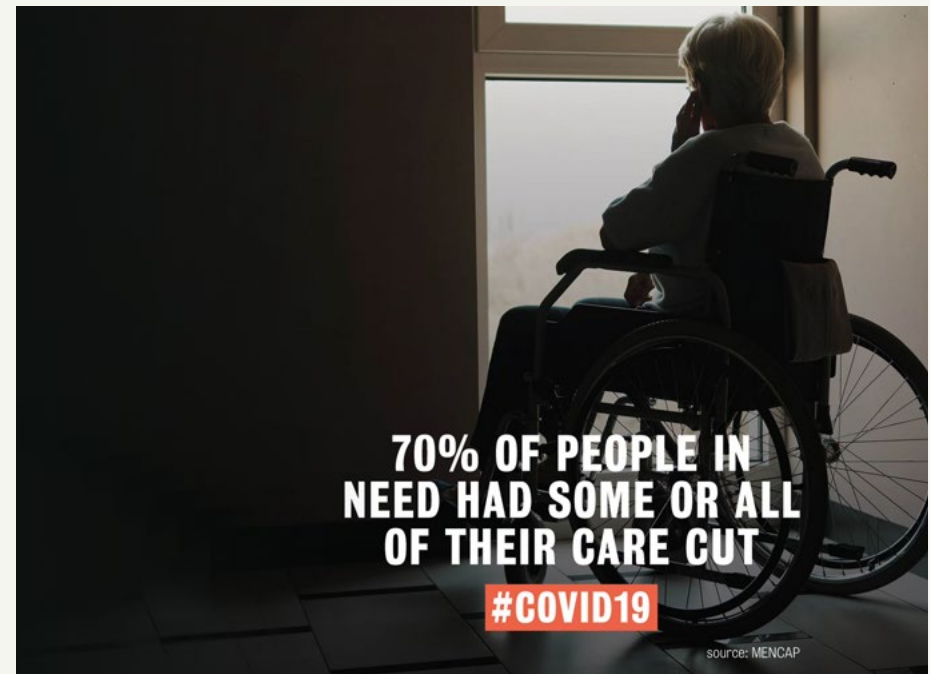
3 Case studies of successful campaigns during coronavirus

Over the last year, society has faced profound challenges, many of which have been compounded by pre-existing inequalities and racism. At the same time, people have come together to support each other and press for change in their communities and on a national level. Campaigning has happened on a range of issues, including climate change, systemic racism and violence against women. However, this report focuses specifically on campaigns related directly to the Covid-19 response as a powerful demonstration of the ways campaigning makes society healthier, more prosperous and more socially cohesive.

The case studies included show the breadth of this campaigning. They are drawn from different types of organisations that have diverse constituencies, cover a variety of issues, have used an array of tactics, and have sought change on different scales. While some of the cases sought to work with local and national government to develop and implement policies and programmes, others were focused on awareness raising among the public or within specific communities. Some sought to hold ministers and civil servants accountable for the decisions they made during the pandemic. We believe all these forms of campaigning are equally valuable and have contributed to the effectiveness of the UK's Covid-19 response in different ways.

The content for these case studies was gathered through semi-structured interviews and short questionnaires. Written case studies

were then shown to the contributing organisation to confirm accuracy. The authors have made efforts to use organisations' own language and framing as far as possible.



1 Trades Union Congress: Winning furlough

As the UK started to lock down in early March 2020, there was huge uncertainty about what the impact would be for employers and workers.

Initially, the government assumed insurers would cover losses as non-essential businesses started to close. But it rapidly became clear the government had to intervene to stop businesses closing for good and laying off workers. If the government wanted workers to stay at home, it had to make sure they still got paid. And if lockdown was to be only a temporary interruption to trading, then the government had to make sure businesses could retain their staff on the payroll to give them the best chance of reopening smoothly after the crisis.

Seeing the way the economy was going, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) believed a job subsidy scheme was the answer. Leaving businesses to cope alone would lead to economic destruction and mass unemployment, consigning millions overnight to limited social security would cause immense hardship.

The TUC launched the campaign for a job subsidy scheme in mid-March 2020. They set out how a scheme should work, and started campaigning for it. When others were still calling for loans to support employers, the TUC published a plan and promoted it in the media and to select committees. Early on, they formed an alliance with the Confederation of British Industry (CBI). Reflecting their different interests, the TUC's priority was that the scheme was as generous as possible for individual workers while the CBI's was that it was as straightforward for employers to operate as possible. Others – such as the Resolution Foundation – also started to promote the idea of a job subsidy scheme.

Within days, the TUC were talking to the new chancellor and his team in person, firmly advocating a generous system that started quickly and offered as much reassurance to employers and workers as possible.

The TUC went from formulating the proposal, to campaigning for it, to talking to the chancellor about it, to getting it – in around ten days.

On Friday 20 March, the chancellor announced the government would set up the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, covering 80% of the salary of furloughed workers. In his speech, the chancellor credited the TUC and the CBI.

The TUC were fortunate to have direct access to the new chancellor, even though there was no pre-existing relationship. Over the course of those ten days, the TUC worked closely with the chancellor and his civil servants and special advisers. The TUC demonstrated they were willing to put ideological differences aside to work with a Conservative chancellor to save jobs.

The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, which has evolved during the course of the first year of the pandemic, has protected 11 million jobs, preventing immediate widespread unemployment that would have devastated people's lives and communities.



The Chancellor meets with Frances O'Grady - TUC, Carolyn Fairbairn - CBI and Mike Cherry - FSB to discuss the crisis. Credit HM Treasury

2 Living Streets: Supporting safer walking and cycling

As new Covid-19 restrictions and public health measures came into effect in March 2020, it quickly became apparent that street infrastructure in many villages, towns and cities was not suitable for walking and cycling given the need for social distancing. For example, narrow pavements and limited pedestrian streets made it hard or impossible to maintain a two-metre distance between people. And with the stay-at-home order in place, huge numbers of people took advantage of the permitted one hour of exercise to get out walking, running and cycling. While the allocation of public space had been a problem prior to Covid-19, the pandemic highlighted the need for greater room for pedestrians and cyclists.

In May, the government created the Emergency Active Travel Fund to support the installation of temporary projects, including allocating £250 million to local councils and combined authorities to support safer walking and cycling in England. Approximately 10 combined authorities and 70 local authorities were granted funding. However, the need for rapid action meant the funding was allocated quickly and schemes were introduced at speed, resulting in hostility to the proposed changes in some areas.

Living Streets, along with their local volunteer groups and supporters, campaigned for the funding to prioritise walking and cycling. Specifically, they wanted to see the funding used to make public spaces safer and more pleasant to use, through, for example, closing rat runs in residential areas and introducing wider pavements, school streets and safe access to green space and nature. Living Streets engaged directly with local authorities, mobilising 2,000 public supporters to write to their local councillors and working with local volunteer groups.

As a result, Living Streets successfully supported local councils and combined authorities to implement pedestrian and cycle-friendly measures to improve street infrastructure around the country – from



Family using a new LTN in Rotherhithe Southwark 2020. Credit Crispin Hughes

pop-up cycle lanes and low-traffic neighbourhoods in Birmingham to school streets in Leeds. Transport For London alone funded 123 low-traffic neighbourhoods, 204 school street schemes and 205 projects designed to create additional space in town centres, benefiting thousands of people. Sustained local engagement and myth-busting was critical to the success of the campaign. While some of the measures, such as widening pavements, may be temporary, others, such as 20 miles per hour zones, will endure.

During the campaign, public interest in the issues was such that 19 new Living Streets local groups formed around the country, demonstrating the value people place on making walking and cycling an easier and safer option. A recent survey found that 40% of people expect to walk more than they did before the pandemic.⁵

3 People's Vaccine Alliance: People's Vaccine

In April and May 2020, as conversations about Covid-19 vaccinations increased, campaigners working on access to medicines understood that without action low and middle-income countries were likely to miss out on vaccines. Current inequalities in the global health systems and historical lessons from the HIV crisis indicated that all tests and treatments would likely be concentrated in rich Western countries unless action was taken. Nine out of ten people in poor countries are set to miss out on Covid-19 vaccines in 2021. In contrast, wealthier nations have purchased enough doses to vaccinate their entire population almost threefold.⁶

**I WANT A
PEOPLE'S
VACCINE,
NOT A PROFIT
VACCINE.**

#PEOPLESVACCINE
[PEOPLESVACCINE.ORG](https://peoplesvaccine.org)



Poster. Credit The People's Vaccine

It was clear the global community faced two main challenges in securing equitable access to vaccines: the supply of vaccinations and vaccine nationalism. Campaigners formed the People's Vaccine Alliance, a coalition of organisations including Amnesty International, Free the Vaccine, Frontline AIDS, Global Justice Now, Oxfam, Public Citizen, SumOfUs, Tearfund, UNAIDS and the Yunus Centre. Its purpose was to campaign for all Covid-19-related knowledge, data and technologies to be shared and freely available; a global and equitable distribution plan; and guarantees that vaccines, tests and treatments would be provided free of charge for all.

The campaign targeted large pharmaceutical companies and governments by applying various public and private tactics, such as high-profile letters, public campaigns and public days of action. Public mobilisation changed dramatically due to Covid-19 restrictions but supporters continued to engage by contacting pharmaceutical companies asking them to share knowledge and technologies. Alliance members also met directly with companies and governments around the world to discuss what changes are needed.

The campaign focused on the interconnectedness of the issues – both health and economics – and demonstrated how the vaccination (or not) of people in other countries affects everyone. While the campaign is ongoing, the Alliance achieved important results, particularly in raising awareness among the public and politicians. Leading public figures from around the world have come out in support of a People's Vaccine, including Gordon Brown – former UK prime minister, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf – former president of Liberia, President Ramaphosa of South Africa, Prime Minister Khan of Pakistan, Bernie Sanders, Mohammed Yunus, Graca Machel and the Archbishop of Cape Town. In September and December 2020, the Alliance secured broad media coverage highlighting the inequalities in accessing vaccines and forecasting future access based on modelling. This led journalists to ask important questions of pharmaceutical companies and governments.

4 Women's Aid Federation of England: Funding for domestic abuse support services

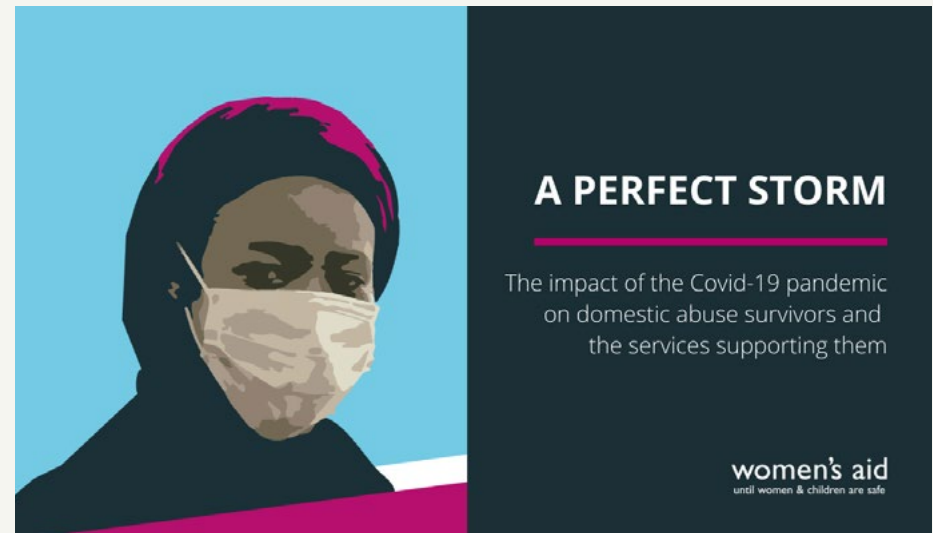
Women's Aid were sounding the alarm about domestic abuse from the very beginning of the pandemic. It is widely evidenced that health crises substantially increase the risk of various forms of violence against women and girls (VAWG) and Covid-19 proved no different. Barely two weeks after the first lockdown was announced, domestic abuse helplines and websites were experiencing an unprecedented increase in calls and visits.

Lockdown measures were providing perpetrators with a tool to control and abuse, and this escalation of abuse was compounded by restrictions on survivors' access to public services and support. Such services, already experiencing a funding crisis before Covid-19, were hit with a perfect storm of increased demand, reduced fundraising income, staff sickness and absence, and practical challenges in service delivery.⁷

At first, women and other groups facing discrimination were largely invisible in the government's Covid-19 response and the lack of planning to mitigate risks to women and children experiencing violence and abuse was clear. It took sustained campaigning and joint work with the whole VAWG sector to ensure these issues received the attention needed.

Women's Aid campaigned for the UK government to fund life-saving domestic abuse services and take action to support women and girls. Following a survey of domestic abuse support services, they called for £48.2 million to ensure domestic abuse services could cope with Covid-19 for six months, including ring-fenced funding for services led 'by and for' black and minority women, disabled women and LGBT domestic abuse survivors.

Drawing on their national network of 170 specialist domestic abuse services in England, Women's Aid were able to produce robust research demonstrating the impact of Covid-19 on women and girls, the tools



A perfect storm report, Women's Aid

of abuse, and the impact on domestic abuse services. This research provided valuable evidence for parliamentarians and the Domestic Abuse Commissioner's office to hold the government to account and press for greater support for the sector. Combined with high profile media coverage, Women's Aid and their allies ensured the government could not ignore the issue.

Working in partnership with organisations across the sector, Women's Aid secured approximately £30 million in emergency funding for domestic abuse and VAWG services in April 2020 as part of the £750 million support package for charities across the UK. The government made a further £12 million available in top-up funding in November 2020, specifically for organisations working to support those at risk of domestic abuse. This enabled many organisations to continue to provide lifesaving support to women and girls, including providing refuge accommodation, local outreach, and support and empowerment programmes.

5 Anti-Tribalism Movement: Building awareness of the impact of Covid-19 on people of colour (with a focus on British Somalis)

Covid-19 has had a disproportionate impact on socially marginalised groups. Since the first wave of the pandemic, the risk of death after being diagnosed with Covid-19 has been much higher among people of colour (POC). The Anti-Tribalism Movement (ATM) observed and documented the challenges facing the British Somali community during the emergence of the virus and worked to build awareness both within the community and among central and local government.

Throughout the first lockdown, misinformation and poor understanding of the restrictions – compounded by language barriers – meant the British Somali community struggled to access financial support through Universal Credit and other government schemes. Working with their partners, ATM set up a WhatsApp group channel to share translated information on Covid-19 restrictions, government updates and the financial support available for grassroots organisations. This information was distributed to community organisations, who then circulated it among their networks. This created a holistic environment where the community could share challenges and solutions.

ATM published a report outlining how the British Somali community (and other racialised people) were affected, which was endorsed by 27 community organisations across the UK.⁸ ATM's findings demonstrated a disproportionate impact on this community in many areas, such as housing, health, income, education, technology and community infrastructure. The significant inequalities faced by the community have been exacerbated during lockdown and will continue to play a major role in people's lives post-Covid-19. This research was used to brief local authorities, the police, grassroots donors, and the departments for Health and Education. ATM facilitated roundtable dialogue through Zoom video conferencing meetings, with relevant government decision makers from the local and central levels.



Credit Anti-Tribalism Movement

ATM went on to provide a series of policy briefing papers and research intended to raise awareness about the impact of Covid-19 on specific areas, including mental health support, women, unemployment, and remittance payments to Somalia.

In June 2020, ATM began working with Comic Relief and the National Emergency Fund to provide micro-grants of £432,000 to POC-led community organisations. This strived to address the problems highlighted by their research. In the process, ATM successfully campaigned for donors to change their funding practices to support community organisations' needs, such as core costs provisions. As a result of all these efforts, ATM were able to provide a safety net and support for community organisations to aid their recovery and survival.

Despite the Somali community's continuous efforts to lead conversations on the necessary ways to receive support, they are rarely included in the decision-making process. However, ATM's engagement during the pandemic provided a bridge between the Somali community and the government, giving a voice to the estimated 350,000 to 500,000 British Somalis.

6 Shelter: Evictions ban

Throughout the pandemic, many people living in privately rented accommodation have been at risk of losing their homes. Employment insecurity and financial shocks, such as job losses, redundancy, zero-hour contracts and illness, have meant hundreds of thousands of people have fallen into rent arrears. However, it was not just people in financial trouble who were at risk. Even before Covid-19, 11 million private renters in England were under constant threat of Section 21 'no-fault' eviction. At the beginning of the crisis, a number of landlords were threatening to evict tenants not for failing to pay rent but for having travelled abroad, or even for working in the NHS.

In response, Shelter began campaigning for a complete ban on eviction proceedings. They wanted to ensure no one was evicted during the pandemic and prevent landlords from taking renters to court or physically evicting anyone.

Shelter mobilised supporters on Twitter who maintained the pressure, and the campaign snowballed with the use of creative social media content and a Covid-19 emergency petition. At the same time, Shelter worked behind the scenes with civil servants in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. As a trusted partner in the housing sector and provider of legal advice to tenants, Shelter were able to present decision makers with a clear picture of what was happening in communities across the country and share solutions to the problem.

They won at the end of March 2020, when the government promised no one should lose their home due to Covid-19 and temporarily increased the notice period landlords were required to give from two to three months. All eviction proceedings were suspended for an initial period of 90 days – but landlords were still able to serve notice on their tenants. The eviction ban was extended several times during the first year of the pandemic. In the run up to each extension, Shelter, along with



Social media post, Eviction ban campaign. Credit Shelter

Generation Rent, London Renters Union, ACORN and other renters unions, mobilised the public and engaged the government to demonstrate the negative impact lifting the ban would have on millions of people. When the ban was finally lifted in September – six months after the initial ban was introduced – it was subsequently replaced with a ban on bailiffs physically evicting tenants during further lockdown measures, as a result of further campaigning.

The pandemic has created uncertainty in everyone's lives – worrying about being evicted and potential homelessness should not be one of them. Assuming levels of evictions would have been the same as the previous year, Shelter estimates between 27,000 and 28,000 evictions were prevented by the ban.

7 Pregnant Then Screwed: But not maternity

In response to Covid-19, hospital trusts placed various restrictions on who could be present during ante-natal care and labour. As lockdown restrictions eased during the summer of 2020, individual NHS trusts interpreted the guidance in different ways. Many women continued to have to attend appointments alone. During labour, some trusts only allowed a partner to be present for 'established' labour, leaving women labouring alone for hours, and, in some cases, resulting in partners missing their child's birth. The campaign highlighted heart-breaking accounts of women's experiences: learning their baby's heart had stopped beating without their partner present; being induced while their partner waited in the car park; and having to look after a new-born alone while recovering from major surgery.

A number of organisations came together to campaign against birthing restrictions, including Pregnant Then Screwed (PTS), BirthRights, Aims, Birth Bliss, MakeBirthBetter and the Fatherhood Institute, along with individual campaigners. Their request for the health secretary and NHS trusts was simple: partners should be present for all appointments and allowed to attend throughout labour.

In August, PTS partnered with Conservative MP Alicia Kearns to raise awareness in parliament and lobby the government to address the issue by providing clear guidance to trusts. Their use of poignant case studies and in-depth research helped gain broad cross-party support for lifting the restrictions. Additionally, The Mail on Sunday adopted the campaign and ran a series of articles featuring PTS's research and case studies.

This pressure led to the creation of a framework that facilitated the reintroduction of visitors and partners to maternity services in September 2020. NHS England and NHS Improvement wrote to the heads of nursing and midwifery in NHS trusts instructing that the guidance must be implemented.

Many trusts went on to relax guidelines, but as infection rates rose again in October and November, they began implementing birthing restrictions again. PTS continued the pressure on social media by highlighting which trusts were failing to lift the restrictions. Consequently, in December, the NHS issued revised guidance that stated a pregnant woman should have a person of her choosing with her at all stages of her maternity journey, and all trusts should facilitate this as quickly as possible.



Credit Chloe Kirton

8 Joseph Rowntree Foundation: Uplift of Universal Credit

Over the last ten years, the UK's social security system has faced cuts and freezes – resulting in a system that is no longer able to protect families from poverty and destitution. In March 2020, the government recognised this and introduced a £20 weekly uplift to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit for one year. The move was widely recognised by many anti-poverty organisations as the right thing to do. Although they condemned the exclusion of families on legacy benefits, such as Employment and Support Allowance, Jobseeker's Allowance and Income Support (the majority of whom are disabled, sick or carers) who were excluded from the uplift.

However, in advance of the Autumn Budget it became clear the government viewed the uplift as a temporary measure and intended to cut it. Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) research showed this would affect 6.2 million low-income families, pulling 500,000 people into poverty.⁹ To prevent this, JRF began working with leading charities such as Citizens Advice and the Trussell Trust, building a network of over 85 organisations on a campaign to Keep The Lifeline, agreeing on a central narrative and message to align behind. Building cross-sector support from poverty-focused charities, those focused on health and disability, unions, senior cross-party MPs and former prime ministers was crucial to the campaign.

Drawing on in-house modelling and analysis, JRF demonstrated the impact cutting the uplift would have on different demographics around the country. Continually updating their arguments to reflect the changing political narrative and policy discussions, they demonstrated the economic value of investing in social security during a recession and the ineffectiveness of one-off payments. This evidence and stories of impact were crucial in securing broad media coverage.

Over the course of the pandemic, JRF saw a shift in public interest in poverty in the UK, with opinion polling from the Health Foundation confirming that 59% of the public supported making the uplift permanent.¹⁰ Working with other organisations in the sector, JRF mobilised a strong public supporter base who signed petitions and engaged with their MPs.

The campaign sought to build parliamentary support through select committees and all-party parliamentary groups (APPGs), with the Work and Pensions Committee recommending in February 2021 that the uplift should be made permanent, and at least should be kept for another year. The campaign was also successful in gaining cross-party support from MPs, many of who were concerned about the impact cutting the uplift would have in their constituency.

As a result, in the March 2021 Budget, the government announced they would extend the uplift for a further six months. Unfortunately, this means the cut to the incomes of 6.2 million families has simply been delayed until September, when unemployment is expected to peak. Further, the government has continued to exclude legacy benefits from the support, leaving millions of families, the majority of whom are sick, disabled or carers, to continue on inadequate levels of support. JRF will continue to campaign for the uplift to be made permanent because 'this pandemic has shown us that life is full of things we can't plan for, and we all need a social security system we can rely on'.¹¹



9 Liberty: Scrap the Act

The Coronavirus Act 2020 was introduced to provide the government with emergency powers to handle the Covid-19 crisis. It was passed in a single day in March 2020 and brought about the greatest limits on civil liberties in a generation, with little scrutiny and limited review mechanisms. The Act affected an array of sectors and individuals, granting broad policing powers that had a strong impact on already over-policed communities and allowing for protest rights to be severely limited.

In advance of the Act's six-month review in September, Liberty campaigned for MPs to vote against its renewal. Working closely with Big Brother Watch and 21 other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society groups they were able to gain wide support among backbench Conservative MPs and opposition parties, using a combination of case studies, investigative journalism, and Freedom of Information requests to make the case for why the Act needs to be scrapped. Working with parliamentary champions, they supported MPs to publish opinion pieces and gain wide media coverage, which helped convince more MPs to vote against renewal.

As a result, the campaign forced the government to make concessions to head off a larger rebellion. The government agreed to ensure better parliamentary scrutiny of changes to laws during the pandemic, ensuring Parliament would be consulted and given more of a voice in the process.

A key challenge during the campaign was that the review mechanisms were written in a way that meant amendments were unlikely to be accepted for debate by the Speaker. This meant MPs could only vote yes or no – with no room for any nuanced concerns to be voiced. As a result, some MPs felt that because there was no alternative to the Act they did not want to vote against it and leave a legislative hole.

The campaign is ongoing. Liberty has teamed up with charities, NGOs and lawyers to present a positive alternative: the Protect Everyone Bill.¹²



Bumper sticker. Credit Liberty

10 Ubele Initiative: We Need Answers

Structural inequality and racism made people of colour (POC), who constitute a high number of key frontline workers and are more likely to live in densely populated areas, more vulnerable to Covid-19. Analysis of the first 200 deaths among NHS staff showed six out of ten were POC.¹³

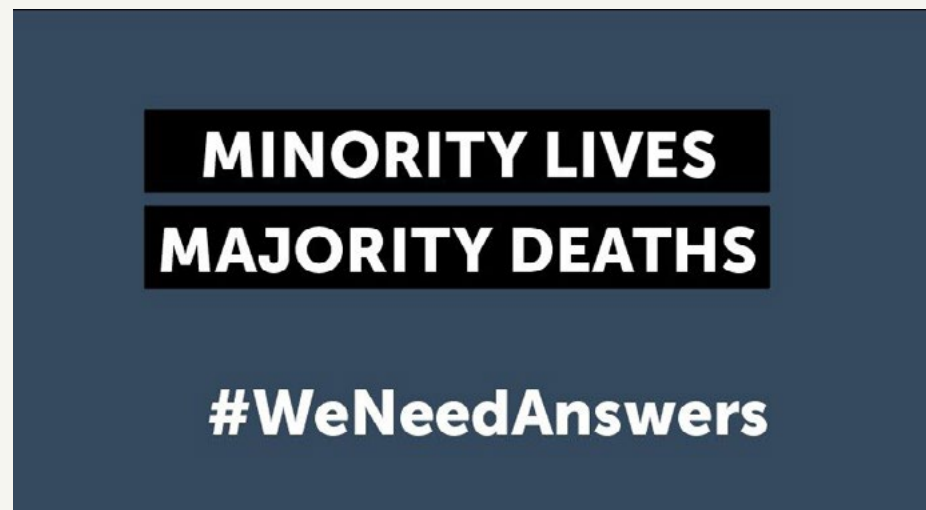
Ubele Initiative launched the We Need Answers campaign shortly after the pandemic began in response to these issues. They wanted to raise public awareness of the disproportionate impact Covid-19 was having on POC and put pressure on the government to take action to address this. The campaign called specifically for the government to hold a public inquiry.

Beginning in April 2020, Ubele held a series of online Emergency Community Conversations to create a space for people to share perspectives on the pandemic and the impact on POC. The first one was

attended by several thousand people and streamed on ITV. A group of young volunteers launched the social media side of the campaign to raise awareness among the community and asked people to write to their MPs to support the call for an inquiry.

Ubele coordinated two public letters to the prime minister, which received extensive media coverage. The first letter, in early May, received more than 700 signatures.¹⁴ The second letter followed the report from Public Health England on the rapid review of the impact of Covid-19 on POC in June 2020. Ubele was critical of the report as the government had removed sections with evidence submitted by community organisations and failed to make any specific recommendations. After receiving no response to the letters, Ubele launched legal action, working with Leigh Day Solicitors, citing significant failures in the government's handling of the Covid-19 response. Ultimately, they decided not to proceed with the court action as the government was legally protected because it could demonstrate it had considered the racial impact in other areas of work.

As a result of the campaign, Ubele made the link between structural racism and Covid-19 a central part of the debate on the pandemic response and provided thousands of POC a platform for their voices to be heard.



4 What we have learned about campaigning during the pandemic

The case studies and broader experiences of campaigning during the first year of the pandemic have taught us many things, both about the benefits of campaigning and how to campaign effectively at a time when we cannot come together in person.

What the pandemic teaches us about the benefits of campaigning to society

The pandemic has demonstrated the important contributions campaigning makes to society. Limiting the spread of Covid-19 has resulted in unprecedented restrictions on our rights and freedoms. While most people accept this has been necessary, this period has shown just how important and precious our democracy and civil liberties are. They are not just 'peacetime niceties' but even more essential in times of crisis¹⁵ when fast action and the imperative to get it right for everyone are equally important. Campaigning has been crucial in this regard, highlighting the impact of the restrictions on our civil liberties, as Liberty have done, while supporting broad democratic participation.

Civil society can provide a channel for people to voice their concerns and share lived experience, including from communities that are often neglected or deemed hard to reach. In this way, it can influence policy for the better and improve the effectiveness of public institutions. But, as we see in the ATM case study, the channel works in both directions – trusted

civil society organisations can raise awareness among communities as well.

Campaigning is also instrumental in proposing solutions to problems and supporting decision makers to make things work. Both the TUC and Living Streets examples show the benefit of civil society working with national and local government respectively to find practical solutions in rapidly evolving contexts, enabling the government to enact successful and popular policy.

Limiting the spread of Covid-19 has resulted in unprecedented restrictions on our rights and freedoms. While most people accept this has been necessary, this period has shown just how important and precious our democracy and civil liberties are.

Often campaigners seek to highlight and address the root causes of problems, as in the case study from the People's Vaccine Alliance, which highlights the barriers intellectual property rights pose to vaccine access

in developing countries. Such approaches are often more lasting and more likely to avoid damaging or counter-productive side effects. The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing problems, as discussed in the Shelter, JRF and Women's Aid case studies. Without concerted efforts now to address the root causes, these campaign successes will not lead to lasting change.

Finally, campaigning helps hold decision makers accountable for their decisions and actions, as Ubele demonstrated in their campaign for answers on the disparity of racial impacts. While governments in some countries see accountability as an inconvenience, democratic societies understand that better decisions are made where institutions are answerable to the public.

What campaigners have learned during the pandemic

During interviews for the case studies and reflections on broader experiences of campaigning during the pandemic, four crucial lessons emerged that we believe will continue to help campaigners in the years to come.

1 Moving online

The pandemic has moved campaigning online which has enabled the participation of people up and down the country and created space for more than just the usual faces to lead engagement.¹⁶ At the same time, digital exclusion has created new barriers, which often reinforce existing inequalities.

Shifting to video calls and instant messaging has enabled campaigners to do more, faster. For example, Shelter's community organiser in Birmingham thought the move online contributed significantly to their ability to mobilise local community groups quickly to oppose a new housing development in a deprived area that did not include affordable housing.

In just days after the plans were announced in a local newspaper, local community groups wrote an open letter to the planning committee and their MP, started a Twitter campaign and participated in a council-run virtual planning session. As a result of their quick action and the significant awareness they raised, the developer got in touch with them to discuss resubmitting planning permission with more than 50 affordable houses.¹⁷

Campaigners have been able to hold shorter and more frequent calls with decision makers, particularly MPs, which has helped with maintaining relationships. And the informality of instant messaging has allowed some campaigners to cover more ground. Conversely, it has made building new relationships challenging – when the pandemic began, the new Parliament was not quite three months old and the 2019 election had created more than 100 new MPs. Remote engagement has made establishing a rapport and trust – crucial for building relationships – more difficult.

2 The importance of working collaboratively

While collaboration has always been an important element of campaigning, many interviewees stressed that the pandemic has made it necessary – both due to the speed at which things change and the importance of cross sector and broad support. The pandemic has opened more opportunities to collaborate within and across sectors and allows organisations to draw on different strengths.

Ubele carried out two surveys in March and April 2020 of 165 micro and small organisations. They found that due to the size of the organisations, many had no reserves and 87% would conceivably cease to operate after three months without support. One of the suggestions Ubele made was for organisations to consider greater collaboration within and across sectors.¹⁸ A survey of campaigners found 96% would like to collaborate more, but a lack of money and time gets in the way.¹⁹

3 Getting ahead of the issues

During the first year of the pandemic, the context was constantly in flux. Rules and legislation changed quickly, often with little warning. This made it difficult for campaigners to stay ahead of the issues. Many felt they were reacting to developments rather than proactively setting out the change they wanted to see. With this came the need to constantly update briefings, respond to questions from MPs and supporters about the impact of changes and decisions, and change direction.

Several of the case studies included in this report had success in the early stages of the pandemic because the campaigners were able to get ahead of the issue. It can be immobilising to be in a context of constant change, not knowing everything. Campaigners stressed the importance of being on the front foot and not waiting for full knowledge before approaching decision makers. The TUC case study is a prime example – they were well positioned to act because they had previously proposed a limited jobs subsidy scheme to protect jobs in the 2008 financial crisis. Recognising where the economy was heading, they were able to get ahead of the issue.

4 Public engagement

People are keen to participate in campaigns and be part of the change they wish to see in the country and their communities.²⁰ However, the pandemic, along with a lack of funding, resources and capacity, has made it harder for organisations to mobilise supporters and facilitate mass participation.²¹ Campaigners have needed to be more creative online – both Shelter and the People’s Vaccine Alliance noted this and many organisations felt they had to step up their social media presence. Shelter has done so by featuring more pieces to camera of staff and people with lived experiences to share updates and explain the issues, which has increased engagement.



Credit Pregnant Then Screwed

5 Challenges to civil society campaigning

The pandemic has presented campaigners with new challenges that have added yet another dimension to a difficult political and operating environment. As we emerge from the third lockdown, the government is set to place further restrictions on certain forms of campaigning. Constraining civil society has three important implications:

- It deters civil society from campaigning. This can result in decision makers losing insight and examples of lived experience from civil society organisations' relationships with local communities and connections with marginalised or underrepresented groups. It reduces opportunities for problem solving and taking collective action to address challenges.
- It undermines democratic values and institutions and reduces accountability. The UK has strong democratic traditions but greater restrictions on civil society will both worsen the country's international reputation and pose the risk of becoming a weaker and less stable society.
- It reveals a disconnect between the views of politicians and the public. In SMK's 2020 campaigner survey, 63% of respondents said politicians have become more negative to campaigning in 2020 (up from 45% in

63% of campaigners said politicians have become more negative to campaigning in 2020.

54% said the public are becoming more positive about campaigning.

2019). In contrast, 54% said the public are becoming ever more positive to campaigning (up from 48% in 2019).²² A similar survey conducted by nfpSynergy in 2013 found that 58% of the public believed 'charities should be able to campaign to change laws and government policies relevant to their work'.²³

Our concern is that the pandemic combined with new restrictions on certain forms of campaigning, such as protest, will worsen these impacts.

Impacts of the pandemic on campaigning

The pandemic has restricted traditional ways of campaigning, such as face-to-face meetings with MPs and protests. Covid-19 legislation has created new barriers to protests with the rules changing several times during the first year. A lack of clarity around what has been allowed at different times has discouraged people from participating and resulted in an inconsistent police approach. Those who have engaged in protests have faced fines and, at times, heavy-handed policing.

Civil society has provided essential support for communities during the pandemic and, as the case studies demonstrate, helped ensure the response is more effective and inclusive. Yet civil society groups are facing a funding crisis as public donations decrease and government support falls short. A survey of Bond members conducted in October 2020 found that 48% of respondents were concerned their organisation would fold in the next two years, and 24% expected their organisation to close within the next 12 months.²⁴ The Covid-19 Voluntary Sector Impact

Barometer, which looks at the impacts of the pandemic on UK charities, found that eight out of ten organisations predict the crisis will negatively affect their ability to deliver their objectives over the next 12 months.²⁵

Pre-existing political, legal and regulatory constraints

A clear and consistent legal and regulatory framework is important for effective campaigning. But campaigners have had to contend with a challenging political environment and restrictive legal and regulatory requirements for several years. In a survey conducted in the months before the pandemic began, 90% of UK campaigners said they thought the freedom to organise, speak out or protest was already under threat.²⁶

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1 A challenging political environment

Campaigners seeking to hold the government to account or confront injustices face a challenging and at times antagonistic political environment. Past statements from the former Chair of the Charity Commission, government ministers and prominent parliamentarians have contributed to a dominant narrative that undermines campaigners and delegitimises campaigning.

While a recent statement from the CEO of the Charity Commission confirms that 'Charities are allowed to campaign and to take controversial positions in support of their purpose'²⁷, they continue to be criticised for doing so. Charities have been censured for speaking out against racism and discussing the legacies of colonialism;²⁸ non-violent protest groups and organisations campaigning on climate change and animal rights have been labelled extremists;²⁹ and lawyers, particularly those who represent marginalised groups and individuals, have been accused of hampering the criminal justice system.³⁰ Such narratives

polarise public debate and divert attention and energy from the problems campaigners are trying to address.

2 Charity Commission guidance

Regulatory guidance issued by the Charity Commission states that campaigning and engagement in political activity by registered charities is permitted by law, and that it is a legitimate and valuable activity for them to carry out when it supports the delivery of their charitable purposes. It can never be party political. Guidance specifically permits charities to support, promote or oppose the passage of a Parliamentary Bill; make public comment on social, economic, and political issues; and support a specific policy advocated by a political party among other activities.³¹ Most charities find the guidance to be balanced and clear.

However, on several occasions the Charity Commission has attempted to issue further guidance for charities that is more directive in nature. One example of this is the additional guidance issued to charities ahead of the referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union in 2016, which said charities should only campaign in 'exceptional cases'.³² More recently, ahead of the 2019 General Election, the Charity Commission cautioned organisations that 'the political context for this election is very different from that which people may have experienced in the past' and that 'appearing to take a political position on either side could risk undermining public confidence'.³³ Many charities interpreted this as a warning to limit their engagement in public debate ahead of the election.

3 The Lobbying Act

Campaigning in the run up to elections is regulated by the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, which was modified by Part II of the 2014 Transparency of Lobbying, Third Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act, known more commonly as the Lobbying Act. This law, which applies to all civil society organisations, sets out what those carrying out public-facing campaigning can and cannot do ahead of elections to Westminster and the devolved administrations. The purpose

of the Act is to ensure no individual or organisation has undue influence at an election. In practice, the legislation makes it harder for charities and non-partisan campaign groups to speak out on their core issues up to a year ahead of a General Election. Research conducted by SMK in June 2018, found that the Lobbying Act has had concrete effects on charities and voluntary organisations.³⁴

Campaigners are concerned about the Act because the rules are vague and confusing, compliance is costly, and it discourages charities from working together. The rules can also be applied retrospectively (up to 12 months before polling day). While this was just about workable when elections were scheduled years in advance, the two most recent General Elections were called at short notice and proposals to repeal the Fixed Term Parliaments Act mean that snap elections will become the norm. This means campaigners could be subject to the rules of the Act without even knowing it at any time.

A government-commissioned review of the Act conducted in 2016 found that it does not get the balance right. The reviewer proposed several reforms, which were endorsed by the voluntary sector and the House of Lords Select Committee on Charities, but the government has refused to implement them.³⁵ Following engagement with Bond and other voluntary sector infrastructure bodies, the Electoral Commission updated its guidance for non-party campaigners on what they must do to comply with the law. While these changes have made some of the regulations easier for campaigners to understand, there are outstanding issues with the law itself that need to be addressed – the ability to apply the rules retrospectively; limits on joint campaigning; and the administrative burden the regulations place on campaigners.

4 Clauses in government contracts that limit campaigning

In 2016, the government announced plans to insert a clause into all government grants, which would prohibit organisations using the

money to ‘influence or attempt to influence Parliament, government or political parties, or attempting to influence the awarding or renewal of contracts and grants, or attempting to influence legislative or regulatory action’.³⁶ Civil society organisations were concerned this would prevent organisations that receive government funding from giving voice to concerns raised by the people they work with, and even providing feedback on the work that they do with the government.

The rollout of the clause was suspended following vocal opposition. However, government departments have continued to insert so called ‘anti-advocacy clauses’ in grants and contracts. In the latest SMK campaigner survey, conditions on funding that prevent lobbying and campaigning were among the most cited threats to campaigning.³⁷ This is particularly challenging for smaller organisations that often are unable to access other sources of funds for campaigns, such as unrestricted income. The impact of these clauses is compounded by the dramatic loss of income civil society organisations are currently experiencing as a result of Covid-19.

Emerging constraints

Since the pandemic began, two significant reforms are being considered that would undermine campaigning further – changes to judicial review and tighter restrictions on the right to protest.

1 Access to justice

In July 2020, the government established an independent panel to carry out an Independent Review of Administrative Law (IRAL) to consider reforming judicial review. The remit of the review was extremely broad and its terms of reference implied that the government views judicial review as an oppositional force to government, rather than a way for people to ensure decisions made by public bodies are lawful and respect human rights. Civil society organisations feared reforms would make



We Make Events campaign and Let Music Live UK demonstration in Westminster. Credit iStock

it harder for organisations and the individuals they support to use judicial review to protect individuals' rights and their communities and environment.

The IRAL published its report in March 2021, at the same time as announcing a second consultation. In its report, it announced plans to expand government powers to decide which issues are out of scope and cannot be subject to judicial review. This will effectively restrict people's ability to take the government and public bodies to court, undermining access to justice.

2 Restrictions on the right to protest

Public protest is an important part of a healthy democracy and a fundamental civil and political freedom. Yet over recent years significant limits have been placed on the right to protest by the government, police and private companies. In March 2021, the government introduced the expansive Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill, which, among other things, seeks to strengthen police powers to tackle non-violent protests and criminalise trespass.³⁸

The Bill increases the conditions and restrictions for static protests (such as the ability to impose start and finish times and limit noise), increases the buffer zone around Parliament and introduces new rules preventing the obstruction of roads. It places emphasis on the risk of serious disturbance as a consideration – the very purpose of a protest. It also significantly increases the penalties for breaches of these conditions and reduces the threshold for prosecution. If it is passed in its current form, the Bill will significantly affect the ability of individuals and civil society groups to organise and participate in non-violent demonstrations.

6 Campaigning after coronavirus

Covid-19 has had a profound impact on society in the UK and led us all to rethink how we do things. The same is true for campaigning. Campaigners, like everyone, have been under incredible pressure as the need for action has increased just as many have faced challenges personally and related to their organisations' finances and operations. Despite this, campaigners have stepped up and delivered real change. The case studies included here show how campaigning can help decision makers be more effective and inclusive. During a public health crisis, this role has been invaluable.

In the early days and weeks of the pandemic in the UK, the government brought civil society in, and worked with campaigners to identify problems and find practical solutions. The clearest examples of this were the campaign for furlough, which led to the creation of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, which has saved millions of people from unemployment and destitution, and campaigning that sought to highlight the perilous situation facing private renters, which protected tens of thousands of people from being evicted. We believe these examples, and many others, provide a glimpse of what can be achieved when decision makers are open to engagement and work with campaigners rather than against them.

As we enter the second year of the pandemic and begin thinking about life in the new normal, it is clear we need to build better ways of doing things which will deliver a more hopeful future.

Since then, the political and operating environment for campaigners has become increasingly hostile, as the government has once again moved to close the space for civil society. Groups that played a crucial role in the early days of the pandemic no longer have the same access, while others continue to be shut out from the real and virtual corridors of power. Declining income and funding cuts mean many organisations are unable to resource their campaigning properly. The culture wars have intensified and new restrictions on the right to protest and further limits on access to judicial review will place additional constraints on campaigners already contending with the impact of the Lobbying Act and anti-advocacy clauses.

A framework to protect the right to campaign

As we enter the second year of the pandemic and begin thinking about life in the new normal, it is clear we need to build better ways of doing things which will deliver a more hopeful future. To this end, we urge the government to create a new framework that better protects the right to campaign, resting on and enshrining the following principles:

- 1. Campaigning is a crucial part of promoting and protecting open societies, democracy, transparency and human rights.** The rights to freedom of assembly and association and to freedom of expression and information are protected by the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights and other national and international instruments.
- 2. Campaigning is a legitimate and necessary activity for civil society, including registered charities and organisations that receive public funds.** It tackles the root causes of problems and delivers social change. All people and organisations have a right to campaign.
- 3. Campaigning seeks to challenge injustices, hold the powerful to account and deliver social change.** In this way, campaigning is political but campaigning by registered charities and non-partisan civil society organisations is never party political.

- 4. Campaigning is carried out by a range of different people and groups, using a variety of tools and tactics to make change happen.** Campaigners should be able to choose the most appropriate and effective means, including protest – a right enshrined in international law.
- 5. Campaigning requires a supportive and enabling legal, regulatory and political environment.** Democratic values, processes and institutions are the foundation of an enabling environment, fostering debate and conducive to a vibrant civil society.

We need to reset the relationship between civil society and decision makers.

As we tentatively emerge from lockdown, we have an opportunity to do just that. We need the government to recognise the value of campaigning in making politics better, institutions more effective and society stronger.

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Bond
Society Building
8 All Saints Street
London N1 9RL
+44 (0)20 7837 8344
info@bond.org.uk