

# Under Pressure

## SMK Campaigner Survey 2024 results

April 2024

### Key points

- Campaigners increasingly feel the pressure of their work in the face of challenges from government, the media, donors, and their own organisations – a diverse set of stakeholders with complex and competing needs.
- This has led three-quarters of campaigners to question whether they have the energy levels to keep going – despite a similar number reporting they have achieved wins or reached milestones over the same period.
- The three words most used by campaigners to describe campaigning are: challenging, tiring, and rewarding.
- Campaigners highlight the need for infrastructure bodies and employers to provide support for mental health and wellbeing, building links and communities of practice with other campaigners, as well as more conventional offerings.
- 65% of campaigners say the overall landscape in the UK has made it harder to campaign in the past year.
- While there is some optimism that a new government would lead to better relationships between decision-makers and civil society, there is little belief it would result in the more punitive measures that affect campaigning being repealed.

*Highlights from an online survey of 145 campaigners and activists conducted between 1 February and 7 March 2024. Full results at [www.smk.org.uk](http://www.smk.org.uk).*

# 1. Introduction

SMK has long taken the view, and it is becoming mainstream, that ‘campaigning’ takes many forms. It includes traditional public affairs and policy advocacy, working with communities to build their ability to self-advocate, hosting digital networks, or sparking public conversations that can birth entire movements – a broad spectrum of activity that can engage with people individually or reach the entire population.

Just as campaigning constantly changes, so too does the environment in which it happens. The past decade has seen major shifts in the campaigning landscape, with legal and regulatory hurdles, political and media backlash, social media volatility, and funding challenges all growing.

These changes don’t only affect organisations. Campaigners themselves are feeling the toll. Whether volunteer activists or paid professionals, no one becomes a campaigner for the riches – they do it because they are driven to make a difference – so any sign that they are considering walking away in numbers should be taken seriously.

The 2024 SMK Annual Campaigner Survey was extremely rich in insights, which is why we decided to publish this highlights report. It fleshes out the impact of some of these issues on campaigning and campaigners, examining individual experiences, organisational dynamics, and the challenges and opportunities the future holds. Read the full survey results at [www.smk.org.uk](http://www.smk.org.uk)

## 2. Pressure on campaigners could threaten capacity

Over successive years, campaigners have told us it is getting harder to do their jobs. This year, for the first time, we asked about the impact on them personally. A massive 81% report that the pressure on them has grown over the past 12 months.

Most worrying is that three-quarters (75%) tell us that, in the past year, they have questioned whether they have the energy levels to keep campaigning. Despite this, they keep going – 78% report achieving a campaign win or hitting a milestone during the same period. It is a stark warning for organisations and donors to do all they can to support their campaigners or risk losing them through burnout or career change.

When asked to use three words to describe campaigning, ‘challenging’, ‘tiring’, ‘frustrating’, ‘hard’, ‘exhausting’, ‘depressing’ and ‘intense’ all feature in the top ten most frequently used words.

### 3. Personal connection to issues

The proportion of campaigners who have personal experience of the issues they are working on is 63%, which suggests a strong emotional connection drives their work. Of those, 56% would describe themselves as having 'lived experience' – though we know this is a label that some people find empowering, while others reject it as reductive.

This connection can have a personal cost, yet only 40% think there is enough support for people campaigning from their first-hand experience. Just over half (51%) think that their organisation adequately involves people with first-hand experience in their campaigning, and comments suggest that they are aware of both the benefits and challenges of doing so:

*"Campaigns may not accurately represent the views and experiences of those directly affected by the issues at hand."*

Survey respondent

*"We have tried to do this more over recent years, it is specialist, hard work and resource-intensive..."*

Survey respondent

*"There is low understanding of involving people with lived experience and how to do that well here."*

Survey respondent

### 4. Campaigners need more support – personally and practically

While a substantial proportion (65%) feel 'very' or 'somewhat' supported by their organisations, a significant minority (19%) say they feel 'very' or 'somewhat' unsupported. These findings highlight the importance of fostering supportive and inclusive organisational environments.

*"I feel like I have the training, but don't have the time or pastoral support. I recently did some work with Google and was shocked at how much wellbeing support they have."*

Survey respondent

When asked what support they need, as well as training on specific trends and tactics, campaigners call for chances to meet other campaigners, through communities of practice and networking. They also ask for help to cope with pressure and burnout.

*"More of a campaigner community of practice...more chance to meet and share successes and challenges with peers."*

Survey respondent

*“Being matched to others who have walked similar or the same paths.”*

Survey respondent

*“Mental health support that adequately addresses the compounded impact of our identity as people passionate and seeking to change the world, the exhaustion with crises, and the struggle to have success in a politically hostile environment.”*

Survey respondent

## 5. Where is this pressure coming from?

We asked where pressure or resistance is coming from. Unfortunately, the answer seems to be ‘from all sides.’ From MPs to journalists, regulators to funders, and even from within their own organisations.

The results outlined below illustrate how the complex political, regulatory, and financial landscape requires campaigners to navigate an extraordinarily diverse set of competing stakeholder interests.

### Backlash from politicians and media

Well over half (64%) of campaigners say they have directly received backlash from their campaigning activities from politicians. Just under half (45%) say the same about the media.

*“Some MPs state that we shouldn't be engaged in activity that challenges the Government's welfare and cost of living policy, even though it's a clear area of need for our community.”*

Survey respondent

For those campaigning from their first-hand experience, this can extract a particularly personal cost:

*“The government and media have been using a negative discourse around refugees and asylum seekers. Being a refugee myself, I have been forced to protect myself...I don't mind using my real name – somebody has to speak up without fear.”*

Survey respondent

While some have found their issue derailed by wider political tactics:

*“In the past year, clean air has been treated as a political football, and central government has referred to clean air policies as a ‘war on motorists’. Therefore, many politicians on a national, regional, and local level have been resistant and some even hostile towards our campaigning.”*

Survey respondent

## **Pressure from regulators, donors, and within organisations**

The current situation is putting pressure on campaigners and is, in too many cases, seeing organisations and donors adding to rather than relieving it.

Nearly one in three have faced resistance or backlash from a regulatory body such as the Charity Commission (30%) or within their own organisation (29%). With nearly one in five (19%) reporting they’ve faced backlash or resistance to their campaigning by donors.

*“Donors can be worried about backlash by association, but most have said they want to be courageous in their support for us. Some donors have been a bit more hands-on in terms of worrying about how to mitigate for backlash. Internally, we have had to refocus capacity due to backlash...”*

Survey respondent

*“...we have been extra careful around...our public-facing content, for concern – or perhaps lack of clarity – on what is acceptable in the eyes of a regulatory body such as the Charity Commission in an election year.”*

Survey respondent

Nearly a third of campaigners report internal resistance. This might signal problems aligning internal processes and cultures with organisational advocacy goals. Examples include lack of awareness of the role of campaigning, concerns about losing corporate donors, or disagreements over campaign strategies.

*“Internally - this is more a resistance, as there is still a lack of awareness within our organisation of the importance of campaigning and how it contributes to our wider organisational strategy. As a result, we have had difficulty bidding for internal time and resources compared to our other workstreams.”*

Survey respondent

More optimistically, although just under a third (29%) think their boards are too risk-averse when it comes to campaigning, well over half (57%) think they get the balance between risks and rewards of campaigning about right. This is a figure that can be improved with more guidance and support for boards navigating these complex waters.

## Policies or political factors affecting campaigning

Asked what laws, regulations, and policies are directly affecting campaigning activities, changes to protest laws (42%) and negative rhetoric from politicians or media (56%) emerge as the most significant concerns.

The new reporting thresholds imposed by the Elections Act 2022 (25%) and the Charity Commission's social media guidelines (30%) are also cited as notable challenges.

## 6. How is all of this affecting strategies and tactics?

We asked campaigners who said they had achieved a campaign win, or hit a milestone, in the past year what approaches they had found most effective. They report a very broad range of activities (the most cited approaches are in the box below). This reinforces SMK's analysis that social change activity that spans different 'domains', creating connection between individuals, communities, the wider public, and decision-makers is likely to be most effective.

**Working with people and communities affected:** Creating platforms from which people can share their own views and experiences, ensuring inclusivity of culture and language, opportunities to meet decision-makers face-to-face, using art and creativity as ways for people to express themselves and engage with an issue.

**Building networks and coalitions:** Community organising and mobilisation, forming coalitions with other organisations to amplify voices and resources, working with a network of allies and supporters to advance shared goals.

**Evidence-based research, advocacy, and public affairs:** Rooting campaign asks in solid evidence, ensuring reports and recommendations are based in fact by conducting formal research and gathering robust data sets, focusing on overarching objectives, sharing evidence with the wider public, engaging with policymakers and politicians (where it's an option, the 'insider' track has proven effective).

**Strategic communications and media/digital engagement:** Ensuring that your story and evidence reach wider public audiences, tailored communications aimed at different audiences, securing media coverage to raise awareness, leveraging digital platforms and network channels to engage people.

The survey highlights the pivotal role of social media in contemporary campaigning. Respondents still overwhelmingly cite Twitter (72%) and Facebook (54%) as the most useful platforms for advocacy, though responses to recent changes to advertising, search engine optimisation (SEO), and algorithms will still be filtering through.

There is some sign that campaigners are responding. Intentions to increase the use of TikTok (41%) and Instagram (43%) may reflect a strategic shift away from the most heavily monetised platforms and towards newer, visually oriented, and youth-focused apps.

## 7. Is there hope in a change of government?

We asked whether campaigners felt a new government would do much to change the environment in which they work. On many metrics, campaigners are broadly optimistic that a new government would signal a positive shift in approach:

- 66% think development of future policy would be more open
- 60% think a new government would be more willing to engage in meaningful public consultation
- 52% expect new laws affecting civil society would more sympathetic.

While 46% foresee greater willingness to enter into robust public political debate, around a third (34%) foresee 'no change'.

Campaigners are not optimistic that, should Labour win the next election, they would actually improve or repeal existing legislation that affects the freedom to campaign and organise. Only around a third (31%) think this is 'likely' or 'very likely', with a majority (56%) regarding it as 'very unlikely' or 'somewhat unlikely'.

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## About SMK

Sheila McKechnie Foundation (SMK) exists to support and champion change-makers and campaigners – both individuals and organisations – working across a wide array of issues to advance a more just society and a more sustainable world.

We do this by sharing the latest social change thinking and advice and acting as a powerful champion for campaigning as part of a healthy democracy. We believe social change is more effective when we work together, so connecting and growing solidarity across the change-maker community is at the heart of SMK's mission.

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