

A new hope

SMK Campaigner Survey Results February 2025

Key points

- A new Government has brought fresh opportunities and disappointments – but overall campaigners are taking a ‘wait and see’ approach.
- A fractious and polarised ‘public square’ is increasingly a barrier and a source of personal risk – the quality of debate and commentary has a profound effect on campaigners, both in their pursuit of change and personally.
- Evidence from first-hand or ‘lived’ experience is helping to drive breakthrough campaigning moments – but the changes needed to support it are only just starting to be recognised by some organisations.
- Recognition of the power of collaboration is growing but is still hindered by election law around coalitions.
- Campaigner wellbeing remains under pressure, but they are finding ways to maintain momentum and morale.

1. A new Government has brought fresh opportunities and disappointments

This year's Survey shows the clear impact of governmental change on the campaigning landscape.

Overall, campaigners report increased willingness to engage in open dialogue from the new administration. Just over half (51%) report greater access to decision-makers under the new Government, with 53% saying that the Government is more open to campaigners influencing policy and 59% reporting it is more open to meaningful consultation.

"The election of a government that openly recognises the role of social change organisations, and that is willing to enter into dialogue soon enough to impact decisions, has really helped."

On their own terms, these are positive results. However, expectations have already lowered from those reported a year ago. In 2023/24, before the General Election, 66% said they thought a Labour Government would be more open to campaigners influencing policy. This year, with six months' experience in hand, only 53% agree.

The drop is more significant when it comes to the willingness of the new Government to enter into robust public political debate. Last year, 46% thought it would be more willing, but this has dropped to 26% in 2024/25.

"A change of government did suggest movement, but it has yet to be delivered."

The drop in expectations is not necessarily translating into an expectation of being met with suspicion or hostility. Instead, we are seeing big rises in 'don't know' responses, which suggests that campaigners are taking a 'wait and see' approach for now. Alongside this, campaigners report notable shifts in how campaigns are being received, with more positive engagement from officials – even if public rhetoric remains critical.

"There has been a marked change in engagement with the new Government. While on the surface they maintain a hostile rhetoric on asylum, they are engaging, which is a much better position than under the previous Government."

"I think that there has been rhetoric backlash from Labour (in particular Starmer, writing op-eds in the Sun) to climate campaigning and activists, I suspect to look as if they aren't pandering to them because, broadly, the media is quite hostile to climate activists."

Some campaigners express concern that a large majority potentially limits opportunities to influence, and there is frustration that responses like 'there is no money' and 'the other lot left us with too much of a mess' blocks constructive dialogue.

Just under half (43%) expect new Government legislation to be more sympathetic towards civil society. However, just 13% think it's 'likely' or 'very likely' that the Government will review legislation affecting freedoms to campaign and organise, such as protest law or the Lobbying Act, in its first term (down from 31% in 2023/24).

2. A fractious and polarised ‘public square’ is increasingly a barrier and a source of personal risk

Unsurprisingly, the quality of debate and commentary in news media and opinion, social media, messaging platforms, etc. has a profound effect on campaigners – both in their pursuit of change and personally.

Over half of campaigners report resistance or backlash from politicians (66%) and media (52%) in the past year, and 60% say that negative rhetoric is affecting their work.

“Fear of reprisal, instability in employment and personal circumstances for many means that campaigning, even in a professional context, can have deeply severe personal consequences.”

We asked the third (35%) who felt civil society had become less confident about campaigning to tell us why. The top four answers were:

- fear of attack (online, in media, and even physical)
- fear of legal retribution for previously acceptable actions (e.g. protest)
- the rise of far-right activity
- lack of internal support.

“In Northern Ireland, we’ve seen threats and actual violence, intimidation, and racially motivated attacks.”

“Changes to policing of protest have led to a more cautious approach to non-violent direct action and we know that some of our members have been more hesitant at participating in protests and demonstrations.”

We asked those who had experienced backlash or resistance from politicians, media, funders, or internally what that looked like. The top three answers were:

- The media, often purposefully, misinterprets issues or fails to challenge narratives and claims, which affects public understanding of important issues
- Being publicly diminished, excluded from engagement such as ministerial meetings, or briefed against behind the scenes
- Organisation and funder nervousness about tackling ‘controversial’ issues.

“From the media, we’ve seen a constant use of negative and discriminatory language around disabled people and social care, which erodes our ability to engage general public interest on how important changes are.”

“As I campaign within a faith-based organisation, we often hear push back from political leaders and the media that faith does not have a part to play in campaigning or politics.”

“... most donors don’t know how to support campaigning, unwilling to accept its unpredictability, unwilling to enable us to adapt to changing external environments (which is fundamental to campaigning), and still seeking to impose pointless quantitative measures...which skew reporting, create unhelpful incentives, and miss the true value and sense of incremental progress within campaigning.”

3. Evidence from first-hand or ‘lived’ experience is helping to drive breakthrough campaigning moments

The trend towards centring voices of people with direct experience, and growth in the recognition of expertise through experience, continues. Respondents point to successful examples of citizen-led research and deliberation, and breakthrough moments linked explicitly to direct testimony made to decision-makers.

“I have learnt that the most powerful advocates for change are often people inspired by their own experience.”

“Working with people with lived experience on campaigns and them representing themselves and their views to people in positions of power rather than us as ‘professional campaigners’ representing issues has really helped.”

“Creating opportunities for people with direct lived experience of poverty to speak with political leaders and decision makers has led to greater cut through and has had positive effects (e.g. an event leading to a PMQ).”

This shift from more traditional tactics to campaigning with and by people affected requires change within organisations themselves. This is something that many are only just starting to grapple with.

“We are in the process of developing local campaigning along with people with lived experience in a particular area, internally some people who already have relationships with NHS staff in those areas are resistant.”

“There isn’t sufficient safe space for the gradual evolution of approaches, language and positionality. We don’t all know what to do and how to change immediately, these things take time. Deconstructing an entire system and reckoning with a history which has been hidden by authorities for so long is not something a mid-career campaigner can suddenly and fully know the answer to.”

4. Recognition of the power of collaboration is growing, but hindered by election law

“We learnt that banging the drum from multiple angles...really does work.”

A strong theme across the survey was that joint working is delivering increased impact – and even leading to significant breakthroughs. *“Working in partnership and coalition with other organisations has helped our campaigning, particularly on the Mental Health Bill. Joining up with a number of organisations has helped to lift the issue up the agenda.”*

“Early in 2024, joint work with other health charities whose beneficiaries need time critical medication in hospital paid off, with NHS England announcing a quality improvement programme to tackle the issue.”

The 2024 General Election proved to be both an opportunity and a challenge for campaigners. Around a third (31%) say they changed plans to ensure activities fell outside election rules.

"Laws around campaigning in an election period were a bit restrictive. On the other hand, the General Election provided a good anchor point for lots of organisations to come together on joint interventions like open letters or sharing information about what they're planning."

Electoral law still poses a specific barrier to coalition work. One in seven respondents (15%) say they withdrew from coalition campaigning due to concerns about election law. Even those who chose to continue found it challenging to navigate.

"We ran a coalition campaign, so the guidance was harder to interpret and help people be confident in their action."

"We paused some of our campaigning on particular issues as we were aware of clear dividing lines between the parties and didn't want to be seen to favour one party over the other. This also meant pausing some of our campaigning in coalition with other organisations..."

The 'chilling effect' will often never see the light of day, playing out within the organisation itself instead.

"Campaigning rules...are opaque and complex, making...boards and senior management constantly nervous and micro-managing, stifling creativity and evolution in campaigning strategies."

5. Campaigner wellbeing remains under pressure, but they are finding ways to maintain momentum and morale

The state of the nation is taking its toll on campaigners. Global events such as the war in Gaza or the effects of climate breakdown, and the hostility this draws from some directions, are adding to the emotional burden.

"I remind myself that despair is not productive, and that hope is a duty, of sorts. Perhaps the most fundamental duty there is when it comes to trying to make change."

"The sheer number of campaigns people could back, the amount of change needed, feels overwhelming."

This year, funding uncertainty was a strong theme, creating additional strain on campaigners and forcing difficult choices about priorities.

"[I feel] constantly misunderstood and undermined, with senior management always placing highest priority on securing funding over influencing for transformational change."

Where funding can be found, the processes and structures linked to it can work against effective campaigning.

"We are hindered by funders with overly complicated and time-consuming processes, who sap capacity, change their strategic priorities, and suddenly change tack or withdraw large chunks of funding."

To maintain resilience and wellbeing, campaigners need support structures and community around them that goes wider than their own organisation.

“We need flexible funders who understand the importance of long-term movement support and infrastructure.”

“We need more opportunities to engage with and be in solidarity with other campaigners.”

We asked how people maintain momentum and morale in the face of difficulties. There was a strong skew towards collective approaches to care and wellbeing. The top three answers were:

- Staying connected with colleagues and peers: *“We try to stay engaged with the campaigning community, celebrate wins and commiserate when we experience setbacks.”*
- Taking time to celebrate successes, dramatic or incremental: *“We celebrate small victories, wider movement victories, and progress regularly in team meetings.”*
- Staying connected to values, mission, and purpose: *“Nothing groundbreaking, but regrouping, seeking inspiration from others...and refocusing our work. It's always important to remind yourself what you're campaigning for.”*

Full results are available at www.smk.org.uk

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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