# *Hope* in collaboration

How campaigners are responding in the toughest year yet

SHEILA McKECHNIE FOUNDATION | UNLEASHING SOCIAL POWER

# Hope in collaboration

## How campaigners are responding in the toughest year yet

Insights from the SMK Annual Campaigner and Changemaker survey 2025

## 1.  Introduction

Something is changing in campaigning. At first glance, that's unsurprising – campaigners are agile creatures and constantly adapt to events. But this is something different.

Our 2025-26 Survey captures a high state of anxiety and frustration. Campaigners tell us that things are worse for campaigning now than ever before. They are stretched thin in the face of multiplying priorities. Society, politics, economics, and technology are all in flux. Threats to the wellbeing of individuals, communities, campaigning, and even our democracy are rising. Campaigners have the will to address these big social and political tides, but do not feel they have the tools, knowledge, mandate, networks, or energy to effectively respond.

2026 is also a moment heavy with the possibility of positive change, if only the challenges can be met on many fronts. It cannot be the sole responsibility of individuals to fend off simultaneous threats to the foundational structures civil society takes for granted – human rights, the rule of law, accountability, democracy. This moment requires a larger scale response, and it will require civil society leaders and organisations to step up. Our results suggest that most campaigning organisations have yet to make a clear choice about whether to pursue 'business as usual' or change to meet the challenge.

When the SMK Annual Campaigner Survey started in 2016, we never anticipated that it would come to reflect so many campaigners' struggles with far-right extremism, personal safety, or terrorism legislation. Now, on its tenth anniversary, we are relieved that it still exists to document such important experiences.

Yet, even amongst concerns about the rise of the far-right, draconian protest laws, division, misinformation, and hate, one positive trend shines out. Campaigners are actively pursuing hope – not just as a feeling but as a tool. They are looking for ways to generate and sustain it, not just for themselves but for everyone.

SMK sees hope as the renewable energy of campaigning. It is not unquestioning optimism – it is practical. It makes us ambitious about our contribution to a better future. It makes us brave about the decisions we take. It shapes the way we think, plan, and work. It informs where we invest our efforts and resources.

We think that now is the moment that the reality reflected in these pages should cause civil society leaders to pause and ask, 'is it time to do something different?'

This is not about abandoning your mission, repurposing your organisation, and storming the barricades. It is about reflecting on your purpose and asking whether 'business as usual' is still a reasonable response to events. It is about asking how hope might give you the courage and imagination to shift your approach, to protect and pursue your long-term vision.

Here is clear evidence that campaigners are not just trying to *feel* hope, but to purposefully build and share it through collective action. These efforts give us at SMK hope that this moment of possibility already has momentum and can become a moment of evolution.

Just as we can choose to hope, we can also choose to change what we do and who we do it with. But we *do* need to choose.

## 2.  The SMK Annual Campaigner Survey

Since 2016, and every year since, SMK has asked campaigners what is going on in their world. The results have informed our own work but, more importantly, they have brought the experiences and views of campaigners to a much wider audience: civil society leaders, trustees, funders, politicians, and, occasionally, the wider public.

Ten years ago, we would not have dreamed that the challenges facing campaigners today would include: a burgeoning far-right dragging mainstream politics into more extreme territory; growing and multiplying risks to physical, online, and legal safety; or the gradual disintegration of our information eco-system, fuelled by and fuelling misinformation and cynicism.

Some challenges are perennial – funding never seems to match ambitions. Some are new iterations of age-old problems – as the systems that govern our lives become more complex, the work to track, assess, and influence them becomes more time-consuming.
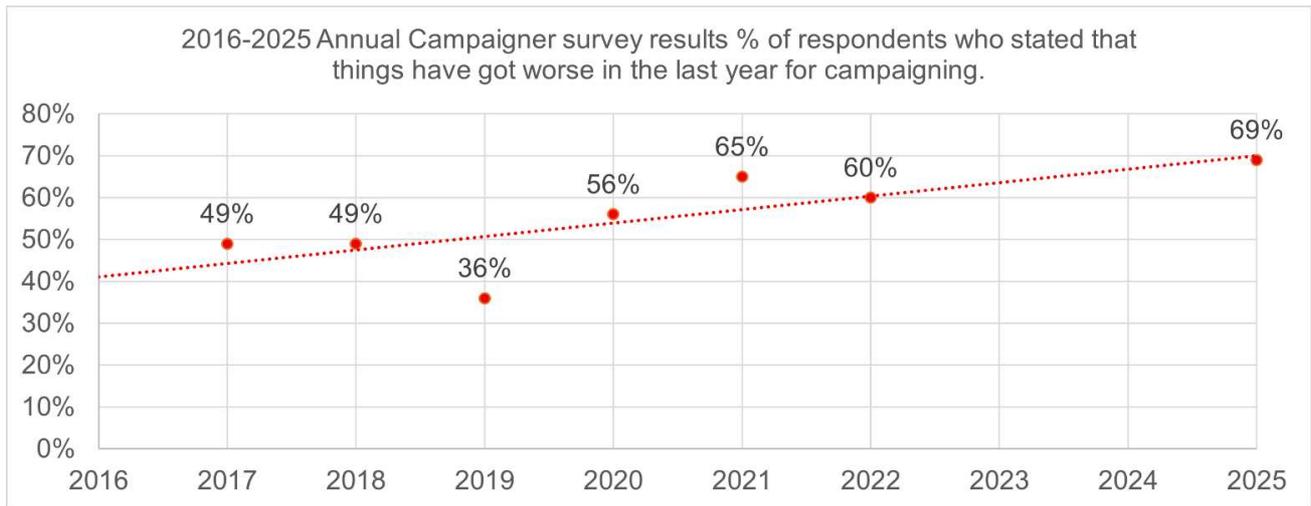
This year's results will be unsurprising to anyone with half an eye open onto the world but are no less shocking for that. SMK continues to capture campaigners' experiences and voices and use the evidence to challenge those whose decisions shape the environment for and health of campaigners. Throughout this report you will see data and testimonies of those on the front line of changemaking, highlighting trends and showing solidarity in this socially vital work.

## 3.  Overview of results and long-term trends

### 3.1. The current environment

There is no question that things are worse now for campaigning than ever before. The vast majority of campaigners surveyed (69%) believe things have got worse for campaigning in the past year. This is a dramatic shift from 2016, when under half (44%) said the same. In 2025, only 14% of campaigners say things have improved and 17% see no change.

2016-2025 Annual Campaigner survey results % of respondents who stated that things have got worse in the last year for campaigning.

Despite some positive experiences, and over half of campaigners reporting a breakthrough moment or success in 2025, they say that it is hard to engage constructively with either decision-makers or the public right now.

Populism and the rise of the far-right are creating a more aggressive and polarised environment for both campaigners and supporters, with many worrying that positive change is a vanishing possibility. There is concern that the current Government is being pulled towards the far right as it attempts to address the threat. Many campaigners find themselves the target of hate and aggression both at work and in their personal lives.

The fragmentation of social media across more platforms, combined with the monetisation of clicks, means that only the most novel, divisive or extreme content is noticed at any scale.

Accelerating changes to protest law and policing are causing concern for personal safety, for the safety of supporters, and for the health of our democracy.
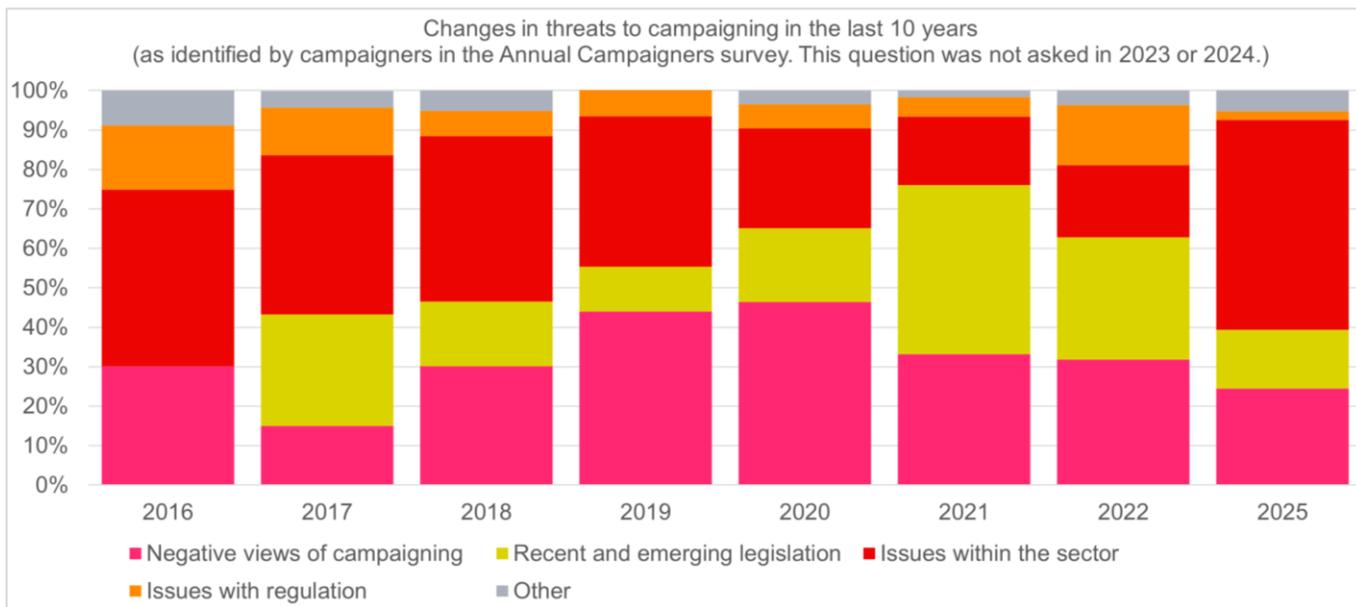
## 3.2 The impact on campaigners

Since 2016, most respondents in our Campaigner Survey (92% on average) have agreed that there are specific threats to campaigning. From negative views of campaigning from the public, politicians and media to issues with the key regulators in the voluntary sector such as the Charity Commission or Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (OSCR). As the graph below shows, these threats are multi-dimensional and the relative significance of them shifts over time. This data illustrates the tactical challenge for campaigning strategies and approaches, given the dynamic nature of threats year on year.

There is a significant rise from 2021 to 2025 in the threat from issues within the sector. Our respondents told us that the campaigning sector is being held back by deep structural challenges that limit its ability to respond to an increasingly hostile external environment.

Chronic underfunding, shrinking teams and a lack of core investment are leaving organisations with too little capacity to plan strategically, innovate or sustain momentum. Skills gaps in areas like digital engagement, legal confidence, community organising and emerging technologies make it harder to adapt, while outdated tactics and overreliance on traditional methods reduce

impact. At the same time, internal risk aversion — driven by legal uncertainty, political pressure and fear of reputational damage — is slowing decision making and diluting ambition.



Changes in threats to campaigning in the last 10 years
(as identified by campaigners in the Annual Campaigners survey. This question was not asked in 2023 or 2024.)

■ Negative views of campaigning  ■ Recent and emerging legislation  ■ Issues within the sector
■ Issues with regulation  ■ Other

Perhaps most worryingly in the 2025 survey, one in five respondents (21%) identified a lack of belief that social change is possible, amongst changemakers and those they seek to engage, as a key threat to campaigning.

The safety of campaigners, volunteers, and supporters is of clear and rising concern – while most still feel personally secure, many (43%) report feeling threatened and exposed by their work, sometimes without proper recognition or support from employers. Anxiety extends to the risk others might take by participating. Threats are both face-to-face and online.

## 3.3 Response and strategies

Despite all of this, campaigners believe that campaigning is both right and necessary. This year, 100% say it's legitimate for civil society organisations, including charities, to campaign for changes to policy, law, attitudes and behaviours. In 2016, 86% thought that more campaigning would be needed over the coming year. Today, 98% say more campaigning by civil society will be needed in 2026.

Campaigners are reaching beyond the frustration and exhaustion for hope and human connection – they are finding it in communities, peer support, creativity, and innovation.

Successes in 2025 were built on: community or grassroots voices cutting through; collaborating with others to bring different strengths to bear on shared problems; staying focused on the change that's needed, even if it takes time; and building better networks, stronger relationships, and human-level conversations.

# 4. What did 2025 look like for campaigning?

## 4.1. Is campaigning legitimate and necessary?

Up from just 88% ten years ago, 100% of survey respondents in 2025 believe it's legitimate for civil society organisations, including charities, to campaign for changes to policy, law, attitudes and behaviours. This follows an eight-year streak of over 98% believing this, but the first time since 2020 it's been unanimous.

Over the past 10 years, those who think there will be a need for more campaigning by civil society in the next 12 months has steadily increased, from just 86% in 2016 to now 98% in 2025.

## 4.2. 69% of respondents say things have got worse for campaigning over the past year. What reasons do they give?
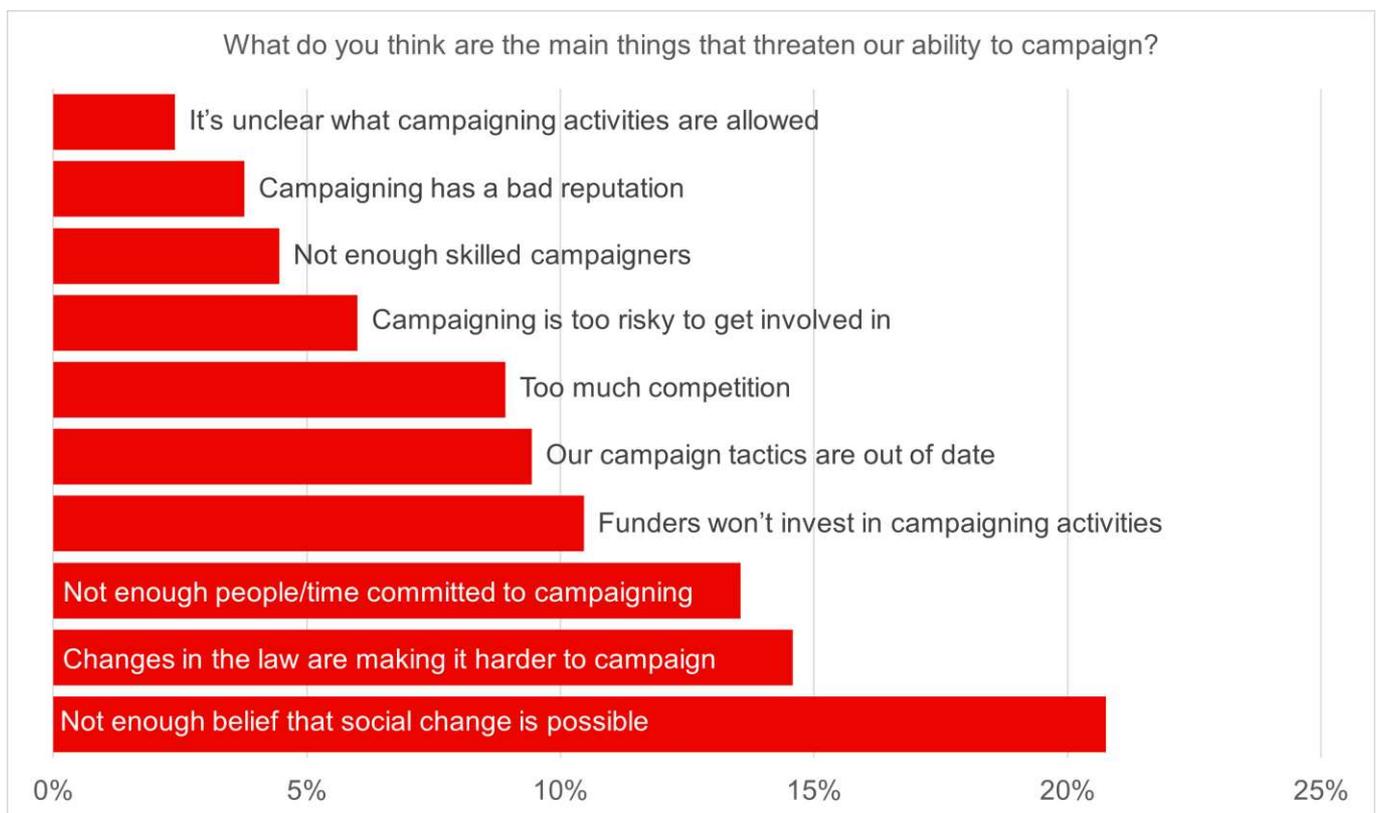


We asked them to expand further. The top five themes that emerged were:

**1. Louder and more polarised public and political environment – rhetoric, extremism, misinformation, algorithms, increased prejudice, aggression**

A clear majority cited the public and political environment, which most believe has grown increasingly more extreme and aggressive. It's important to note that answers expressed concern not only for campaigning but for the safety and wellbeing of people involved in it – whether as volunteers, staff members or supporters.

> *"Polarisation continues to get worse. Seeing the fracturing of the consensus on issues such as climate change."*

*"With the rise of far-right protests being allowed to happen and Pro-Palestine protestors getting arrested, people are feeling scared from migrant backgrounds as they do not want to get harassed or attacked in public for campaigning for refugee and asylum seeker rights."*

*"Mass far-right demonstrations, click-bait social media and growing apathy for conventional government makes it difficult to campaign for a nuanced issue."*

## 2. Hostile legislative environment (protest, terrorism laws, Lobbying Act etc) making action more risky

Legislative restrictions on campaigning are not a new theme in our survey. This year, there is a distinct swing of focus away from election law or charity regulation and towards protest law and policing, the proscription of Palestine Action, and subsequent arrest of peaceful protesters holding signs.

*"As protests have become harder to ignore, Government has made it harder to protest."*

*"… it feels like things have got worse again – whether intentional or not, the Government is increasingly creating a climate of fear around speaking out on issues, especially relating to Palestine."*

*"…changes to protesting and how they have been implemented in recent months, alongside the wider increasing hostile rhetoric to migrants and many of the people we work with and support – from politicians, the media and the public – means it feels a more vulnerable time to campaign and raise voices about these issues."*

## 3. The new Government is as or less receptive to engagement than the last

Although the new Government is cited as the top reason for campaigning getting better in the past year (see below), amongst those who say it has got worse many more cite the exact same reason.

*"I think the optimism that a Labour government would be more open to our demands has been proved false."*

*"The Labour Government is actually proving less receptive to environmental concerns than the previous Conservative Government."*

*"I never thought in a million years that I would spend months this year campaigning to stop changes to PIP for disabled people and their carers by a Labour Government."*

*"The political environment and landscape make policy change increasingly difficult, with Labour leaning into the right and away from progressive alternative narratives to counter the far-right."*

## 4. Public engagement is getting harder

People cite numerous reasons for this, including fatigue created by permanent crises, misinformation, and co-option of ideas and values by the far-right. More broadly, people mention the erosion of faith in institutions, politics, and evidence. Changes to social media platforms, to reward or amplify more polarising or extreme content, also came up.

*"…people are feeling fatigued or powerless by being dismissed or gaslit by those in power."*

*"Difficult to mobilise people when faith in politics is so low. People don't believe they can change things."*
*"The rise of populism and the far-right means that getting your message heard is harder. Especially as we see the far-right weaponise issues, like conflating issues surrounding people seeking asylum with violence against women and girls."*
*"Feels like policy makers and the general public have perhaps become a bit desensitised."*

## 5. Lack of resources for campaigning work

Respondents mention a lack of direct funding for campaigning, whether through individual donations or grants, as well as organisations becoming more nervous about speaking up in case it threatens income.

*"No funding available for campaigning from almost every single trust and foundation – they only seem to want to fund activities."*
*"I think the whole sector has been co-opted by government. Boards and CEOs are too worried about income to actually go out and advocate for change."*
*"Trump administration appears to have chilled appetites from philanthropists to put money into campaigning."*

## 4.3. 14% say things have got better for campaigning in the past year. What reasons do they give?

## 1.The new Government is more receptive to engagement on our issues than the last

This is the most popular response by some margin, with more than half of those who say they think things have got better for campaigning in the past year citing the new Government as a reason. Where the Government shares campaigners' priorities, they report that it is notably more open to engaging compared to the last Government.

*"[The] Labour Government, despite huge constraints, has moved on areas the previous Government was entrenched against."*
*"Civil service and politicians proactively engaging with the sector."*
*"Release of the Civil Society Covenant is reason to be optimistic and anecdotally we have much more communication with officials and parliamentarians."*

## 2. New MPs are more receptive to our issues and willing to put pressure on the Government

It's not just the behaviour of government and officials that gives reason for optimism.
Some campaigners say that backbench MPs are more willing now to put pressure on decision-makers.

*"There have been some big wins like the rebellion over PIP cuts, which I think give people motivation / hope that their actions can make a difference…"*
*"More pressure from MPs on government to rethink decisions."*
*"New politicians are more likely to engage with campaigners."*

### 3. Better collaboration across the sector

Some campaigners point out a greater willingness to step up and collaborate with other organisations.

> *"Climate Coalition Mass lobby – all faiths unity – that is an improvement."*
> *"In Scotland we had the 'Scotland Demands Better' campaign run by the poverty alliance and a partnership of many third sector organisations, which I think has represented a shift in thinking in Third Sector campaigning…"*
> *"More organisations I work with seem willing to invest in and contribute to social change."*

### 4. More motivated colleagues, volunteers and/or supporters – in response to both wins and new challenges

Seeing and experiencing wins over the past year has increased the morale and motivation of some campaigners, supporters and volunteers.

> *"It's been very frustrating that a Labour Government has been so far off what we might have hoped for, but I'm starting to see organisations celebrating more wins, more breakthroughs, and now I'm a consultant working across the sector I'm seeing some amazing practice out there."*
> *"…the hate divide is worse but the courage to stand up has improved across the nation."*

### 5. Opportunities for greater public engagement

Some of those who said that things had got better mentioned opportunities to engage with the public, but these could equally present challenges.

> *"[there is] potential for social media to amplify messages and mobilise support"*
> *"There is increased polarisation among the public, which is risky but offers campaigning opportunities."*

### 4.4. Despite all of this, do organisations feel free to campaign and speak out?

The campaigns community is evenly split (see graph below), with just 49.4% saying they feel free to campaign and speak out as far as law and regulation allow. Even within this group, there is still anxiety about how others might react.

A third of campaigners are worried about how the public might react (33.1%), followed closely by worries about politicians (29.5%), the media (23.5%), and funders (20.5%). A lower 16.3% of campaigners feel restricted by laws and regulations around campaigning.

**Do you / Does your organisation feel free to campaign and speak out, as far as law and regulation allow?**

Chart showing responses (approximate percentages):
- We are not clear what law and regulation allows — ~7%
- No, due to worry about bad reactions from the media — ~23%
- No, due to worry about bad reactions from our funders — ~21%
- No, due to worry about bad reactions from politicians — ~29%
- No, due to worry about breaking the rules and regulations — ~16%
- No, due to worry about of bad reactions from the general public — ~33%
- Yes, we feel free to say and do anything that is permitted — ~49%

## 4.5. What is stopping them?

We asked what barriers or problems campaigners encountered in 2025. Compared to previous years, the sheer scale and breadth of challenges they are grappling with is stunning. The results are a potent mix of vast, societal and political shifts, and internal and psychological pressures.

### 1. Shifting of the Overton window[1] to the right – rise of extreme rhetoric, misinformation, prejudice, and erosion of respect for human rights

Many answers point to concern about a seismic shift in 'norms' and values, driven by a range of factors (misinformation, negative rhetoric, a more permissive social media environment, lack of challenge by media and politicians) but adding up to a more prejudiced and hostile atmosphere – for campaigners, supporters and volunteers.

> *"The rise of the far-right and misinformation."*
> *"Lack of compassion and lack of respect for [rights] of disabled people."*
> *"…we regularly receive racist and ignorant comments and replies on social media, which makes the whole environment more dispiriting…"*
> *"Twisting of terminology around climate campaigning by some political bodies becoming a louder narrative."*
> *"Previously centrist or left-leaning press outlets chasing clicks, and publishing more far-right rhetoric as a result, means less space for progressive campaigns."*

### 2. Lack of funding

Concern about a scarcity of funding is high. This year, we are seeing comments that give us a clue about the wider impact and challenges this creates.

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[1] The range of ideas or policies that the public considers acceptable or mainstream at any given time. Read more here: https://thebasics.guide/overton-window/

Time spent applying for financial support, with less chance of success, is time away from the work of social change. Larger organisations, usually a significant source of research and expertise within the campaigning ecosystem, are no longer able to support others in the same way. The increasing need to manage social media responses across a wider range of platforms is also putting pressure on campaigners.

> *"We've seen a reduction in grant funding, meaning we are more dependent on statutory sources, and we are aware of what raising our voice against government policy means for us."*
> *"The funding flowing into far-right activity which is not replicated in centre or left."*
> *"Team [doesn't have the] capacity to deal with negative comments on social media."*
> *"[Global charity] is down to just one campaigner from a team that's had dozens in previous decades. It means there's less people to collaborate with and big orgs have less capacity to put support into the system."*

### 3. Internal barriers – politics, fear, other priorities

Campaigners report that lack of capacity, legal uncertainty, and a more aggressive public and political discourse have led to organisations reviewing their priorities, approach and tone.

> *"I think people are so happy to be on a better footing with government that in some cases people are slower to call out things we don't agree with."*
> *"Backlash in the media [is] not new but it's a fear some have."*
> *"Rise of the far-right and shifting of the Overton window making campaigning on issues seeming progressive [or] 'controversial' [is] risky from an organisational POV. Desire not to alienate Reform or their voters with campaigns."*
> *"Even though I am clear on what the law allows re campaigning, [my organisation is] very risk averse and worried about 'getting it wrong'."*

### 4. Volatile environment, legal changes, and extremists are all making campaigning riskier for staff and supporters

The risks of campaigning now often extend to safety and wellbeing of staff, supporters and volunteers. This has led some organisations to avoid activity that might once have been unquestioned, like protest, public expressions of solidarity, or platforms for campaigners able to speak from first-hand experience.

> *"…the hate that the political environment has stirred up has made it a more uncertain place for groups of people to get involved in a way that they feel safe."*
> *"Our volunteers often wear respirators because they are disabled…They have been harassed for it and the Government has taken action to make it borderline illegal to wear them at protests."*
> *"Community members are afraid to speak up."*
> *"…this year we've received threats and complaints from transphobic and xenophobic individuals and groups due to our public solidarity for all those oppressed."*
> *"…the public [are] less likely to get involved with certain things due to fear of getting arrested."*

### 5. Tired, overwhelmed, apathetic, lack of faith that change is possible

Past Surveys have seen campaigners reporting feeling tired or overwhelmed, despite feeling broadly supported by their organisation. This year, there is a marked shift in that they are picking up on signs of hopelessness and burn out from the public, even amongst their most engaged supporters.

*"People are so disheartened, even when there is a win people don't believe it will benefit them or change their situation."*

*"Campaigners and activists are leaving in their droves, from burn out or no funding. It is starting to feel hopeless."*

*"…increased racism that our members are experiencing in the workplace means they have less energy to get involved in the union and campaign as they are burnt out."*



## 5. What did 2025 feel like for campaigners?

Few people had an easy 2025, on any measure. Many campaigners struggled with wellbeing, and saw their communities and networks do the same. We asked people to describe in three words what being a campaigner in 2025 felt like.

The top five words are: **frustrating, exhausting, tiring, challenging and hard.**

Despite this, in the word cloud, we can also see the sparks of hope, inspiration, and reward.

## 5.1. So, how do campaigners maintain momentum and morale, especially when change is slow or they face setbacks?

### 1. Invest in relationships between colleagues – time together, celebrate wins, look after each other, value kindness

This may take the form of time, thought, money, spaces for important conversations, or another resource. People's answers here suggest that organisations or movements are investing more on their internal wellbeing and trying to be face-to-face more regularly. Some of that time includes social events or opportunities to relax or be inspired together. Lots of people mention the celebration of 'small wins' and even that they are still campaigning at all.

> *"Having a strong relationship as a team and being honest about the challenges we are facing."*
> *"Senior management who understand that change is incremental."*
> *"To be kind is one of our values, this goes a long way."*

### 2. Stay focused on your North Star – remember your big ambition but set realistic expectations

Many people talked about adapting their strategy for the current context. This might mean identifying more realistic milestones, focusing harder on impact not outputs, or strengthening the communities and people you work with.

> *"Remember the why/who will be impacted by the change we're trying to achieve, why is it needed."*
> *"…setting ambitious goals but realistic expectations."*
> *"Focus relentlessly on what is happening locally that is positive and try to build up local communities so that they are strong and resilient."*
> *"Adapting plans. Not being afraid to start from scratch."*

### 3. Connect with others in civil society – work in collaboration or coalition, build connections with other campaigners, seek out the support of peers

Lots of people talk about the strength they have found through solidarity and the inspiration they draw from other campaigners. Being able to share challenges as well as progress is a valued source of support.

> *"Connecting with peers and others in the space."*
> *"We had a surge of campaigning around the disability benefit cuts, and this felt more impactful as there were lots of voices working together."*
> *"Working well with others, combining our resources and ideas, being 'movement generous'."*
> *"When change is slow or we face setbacks, I tend to find the most powerful thing is community. Especially for orgs who are led by those affected, there's a lot of support and empowerment in community across activists."*

## 4. Actively look for hope, joy, optimism, positivity

Looking for and sharing reasons to be hopeful is a recurring theme. In previous years, we have seen mention of taking inspiration from other people's successes, but this year the search for hope seems much more conscious.

*"When presenting, be honest – give hope and motivation."*
*"Trying to avoid the drama triangle and making myself the hero or victim or getting livid about a villain."*
*"As a faith-based NGO, it's helpful to draw on faith principles and faith leaders."*
*"Keep hope a priority."*

### Spotlight on hope as a tool

We observed in our introduction that 2026 is full of potential for positive change. We showed that campaigners are already utilising the power of hope to make connections, to think differently, to make courageous decisions.

At the moment, they are largely doing so as individuals, revealing an appetite for collaboration and creating momentum towards a different way of working. Now they need wider civil society to step into the space they are holding. It needs to use hope to courageously and collectively protect the structures it is built on – human rights, the rule of law, accountability, democracy – and, above all, the idea that we can change things for the better if we decide to work together.

Hope is the renewable energy that sustains our community and fuels our belief that change is always possible. It is not a naïve optimism that risks becoming the sort of toxic positivity that minimises real social and planetary challenges or sidelines the stories of those courageous enough to speak up.  Hope must not fail to move us toward the urgent action required.

At a time when business as usual is not an option, hope gives us permission to dream boldly and imagine new pathways for social transformation.

## 5. Work and connect with people affected

Lots of people mention that talking and collaborating with people affected by an issue – whether that's colleagues, supporters, volunteers, or communities – is a strong motivation. Although this can look very different for different kinds of organisation, the human connection is clearly very powerful.

*"Bring it back to the people we are campaigning with and for."*
*"We work extensively with lived experience, and the issue is personal for several team members, so we are also able to access the public support services run by our organisation."*
*"[Young people] gain leadership skills out of campaigning and that is a benefit even if we don't get campaign wins."*
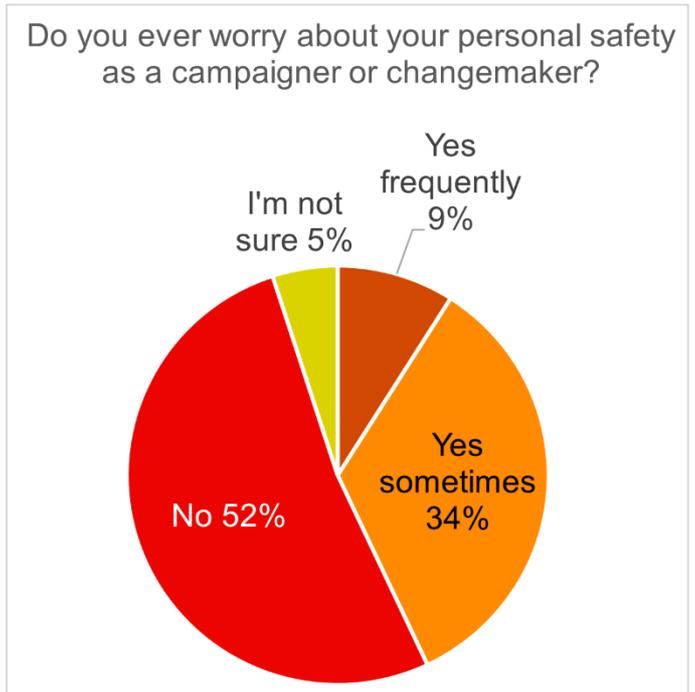*"The momentum is kept by the increasing number of new community voices joining the work."*

*"All our campaigning is rooted in and centres the voices of young people – staff feel deeply committed to and accountable to this, and this is what keeps us going."*

## 5.2. Safety and risk

Most campaigners do not feel personally unsafe: just over half (52%) say they never worry about their own safety. However, this leaves a significant number who are concerned (43% worry 'sometimes' or 'frequently') showing that personal risk is a real and present factor for many people engaged in social change. This level of concern is a warning that anxiety about safety is starting to become a normalised part of campaigning, even in a country that sees itself as a safe democracy. For many people, it is an everyday reality.

We asked those who say they 'sometimes' or 'frequently' worry about their safety to tell us why. The answers that follow underscore the need for better support, reassurance, and protective structures for those driving social change.

**Do you ever worry about your personal safety as a campaigner or changemaker?**

I'm not sure 5%
Yes frequently 9%
Yes sometimes 34%
No 52%

## 5.3. Risk takes different forms

Risk is frequently described as both digital and physical: 18 responses mention *both* in-person risks *and* online harassment, and 50% of responses mention two or more themes overall. This suggests many campaigners experience 'stacked' risks rather than a single cause.

### 1. In-person risk at protests or events

People describe fear of physical attack, being confronted or intimidated at public actions, and a changed atmosphere at mass gatherings. This includes concerns about door-knocking and public-facing engagement.

*"People are unafraid to confront campaigners, with both violent words and actions."*
*"Doorknocking [is risky] in the dark as a woman."*
*"Encountering a small number of climate deniers at some of our events when they refuse to listen, refuse to respect other people's opinions, and will not countenance dialogue or reason, left me feeling nervous of holding public opportunities for community engagement."*
*"Just having public presence occasionally makes me feel I'm attracting some odd types, e.g. on social media, who could turn up at events."*

## 2. Online harassment

A large share cites trolling, threats, targeted abuse, and fear of doxxing (the act of publicly identifying an individual or organization, usually online and without their consent), often linked to being visible, e.g. being the face of a campaign, speaking on camera, or other public communications.

> *"My face is all over our charity comms. I feel vulnerable and very visibly the face of the campaign, without much acknowledgement or proactive protection from my organisation."*
> *"More mentally than physically – the trolling, being cancelled by people misunderstanding or taking out of context and twisting my words."*
> *"I worry that if an ultra-right-wing government were to take power, or Trump's influence were to become too severe, I would suffer in the future for previous social media posts etc."*

## 3. Identity-based targeting or hate

Responses often connect feeling unsafe to hate/hostility aimed at protected characteristics, including references to racism, misogyny, transphobia, Islamophobia/anti-Muslim hostility, ableism, and broader "othering".

> *"As a visibly Muslim person I feel that I am subject to more socially acceptable targeting and hostile attitudes, in particular in the backdrop of heightened hostility towards people from my communities."*
> *"I am also a campaigner for SV [sexual violence], using my own lived experience and that always feels risky, particularly with the rise of the far right and misogyny."*
> *"Graffiti on…walls specifically targeted at Roma and stories shared by Roma from all over the UK are raising levels of personal concerns."*
> *"I have been stalked online and in person, received death threats, faced abuse, misogynoir, misogyny and racism so always have to look at safety."*
> *"Especially when supporting our trans+ students with the current harassment climate of social media."*

## 4. Far-right / extremist opposition

Many explicitly mention the rise of far-right activity or intimidation by extremist groups, particularly around public actions and campaigning on polarising issues.

> *"As a community member myself (gypsy) it's scary to put yourself out there when there is a rise of fascism."*
> *"My details are on my charity website, and a quick Google will find my personal social accounts. I used to be proud to be a campaigner but now I'm worried that my details will be passed to far-right groups."*
> *"…on recent marches (including the Friends of the Earth family-led climate march in Manchester), campaigners have been filmed by radical right activist in facemasks. My son was filmed (as was I) at a recent march and, after asking the person not to film us, we received a lot of aggression. The police did nothing."*
> *"The increasing 'othering' of people with certain protected characteristics is redolent of the early Nazi days and I worry where we are going as a country."*

## 5. Policing and legal restrictions

Campaigners report fear of arrest, being stopped, police hostility or brutality, and concern about changing protest laws and surveillance.

> *"It's become harder to predict what actions are arrestable."*
> *"Every time I go on a protest, I worry that I'll be arrested."*
> *"There are so many restrictions on protest rights now that it feels like any attempt to take a campaign to more active, visible tactics than letter-writing and social media has personal risks, especially for those working in the legal profession."*

# Spotlight on protest, civil liberties and the far-right in 2026

Just under half (45%) of respondents say that their views on the role of protest and direct action changed in 2025, with the rise of the far-right and the proscription of Palestine Action. We asked them to explain their answers.

## 1. Increased anxiety about protest or public statements of support

Concern about organising protests or public statements in support of a cause linked to a proscribed group is the number one theme. People are worried for their own wellbeing, as well as that of others who might face heavier consequences from arrest. The unpredictable response of police, the Government, or members of far-right groups creates further anxiety.

## 2. Appetite for a stronger response to protect civil liberties

There is a sense of disbelief at the Government's approach to civil liberties, especially in the light of the Civil Society Covenant. Some see a pattern of erosion stretching back years. Some say it cements their personal determination to fight back; others want to see more organisations speaking out, and some called for civil society to unite to protect and repair civil liberties.

## 3. Impact of the far-right on campaigners and supporters, and desire for a stronger response to counter it

The threat posed by the far-right looks and feels different for different people. For some, physical and personal threats are very real. Others expressed concern about the way it was shifting public attitudes, feeding anger and division, and polarising society. There was a distinct desire for a better reaction by civil society organisations. Some have already started to act.

## 4. Continuing action is more important, but requires more thoughtful approaches

Many respondents are *more* convinced of the need for protest and direct action – despite the consequences. Some are thinking about how protests can be made safer for supporters or considering how they might help safeguard their rights. Others are turning attention to growing community resilience.

## 5. A perception the Government is being pulled towards the far-right

Some feel that the Government is allowing itself to be pulled, or choosing to move, towards the far-right. There is a sense that this shift means there are some issues it simply doesn't want to engage on and others that people never expected to have to campaign on.

> *"We want to have our say but are worried about arrest."*
> *"I think the sector – not just Greenpeace, Amnesty and Liberty – need to stand firm in opposition. It could be very powerful if they did."*
> *"I feel worried about how campaigners will be able to cut through and convince people and politicians, when the far-right is hell bent on making public discourse so febrile and angry."*
> *"It's getting harder to find cut through, and it feels like the Government are pandering, so we're having to campaign about things that should never have been on the table."*

# 6. How did campaigning evolve in 2025?

## 6.1. Campaign breakthroughs in 2025

Despite some grim trends in other parts of the Survey, over half of our campaigners had a breakthrough moment or campaigning success in 2025. This is important for the social change we want to see, the motivation of campaigners themselves, public opinion about the value of campaigning, and the very belief that social change is possible.

We asked those who reported a success or breakthrough what they thought had made the difference. Top answers were:

### 1. Community or grassroots perspectives and voices cut through

Making space for voices of experience is the most mentioned reason. This might be through media platforms, contributing to public consultations, opportunities to make the case direct to decision-makers, or co-design and leadership of a campaign. What is clear is that, when complemented by other approaches like evidence-based policy influencing or work to shift public opinion, each can reinforce the other.

> *"We had a brilliant event to introduce refugees and people in local communities – worked because of the strength of relationships built up over time."*
> *"Legislative Theatre events, allowing for true participation, work to advocate for change very successfully."*
> *"… [a mass lobby of Parliament had an impact on] the people who participated – giving them the confidence to campaign and to work with others for change – but also on providing MPs with an authentic view of how the cost of living is impacting people's daily lives negatively, which in turn helped to push back the UK Government's intended welfare reforms."*
> *"Community mobilisation and pressure on people in power working at the same time."*

### 2. Work with others to leverage different strengths

Campaigners know that it usually takes many different voices and tactics to cut through and, this year, the appetite for collaboration seems to have grown stronger. Lots of people mention the co-operation that emerged around the Government's proposals to cut disability benefits, which welcomed organisations and campaigners of all kinds and tapped into the broad and deep well of expertise they created. The result was a mobilisation of different people, types of expertise, evidence, and a shared voice.

> *"We were proud to support [the disability benefits cuts campaigning] and add our legitimacy to the grassroots groups who were actually doing most of the work locally, as well as echoing bigger disability rights groups, answering consultations, publishing media, attending demonstrations etc. We have learned that we have to act and work together, quickly and bravely."*
> *"Support from a healthcare professional body – realisation that things do work when you just ask for support and involve people."*
> *"…being part of a big movement matters and galvanises staff."*
> *"Collaborative working – combining movement building with policy expertise"*

## Spotlight on collaboration

In 2025, 93% of respondents say they would like to collaborate more, with answers to this question consistently above 90% since we first asked it in 2019.
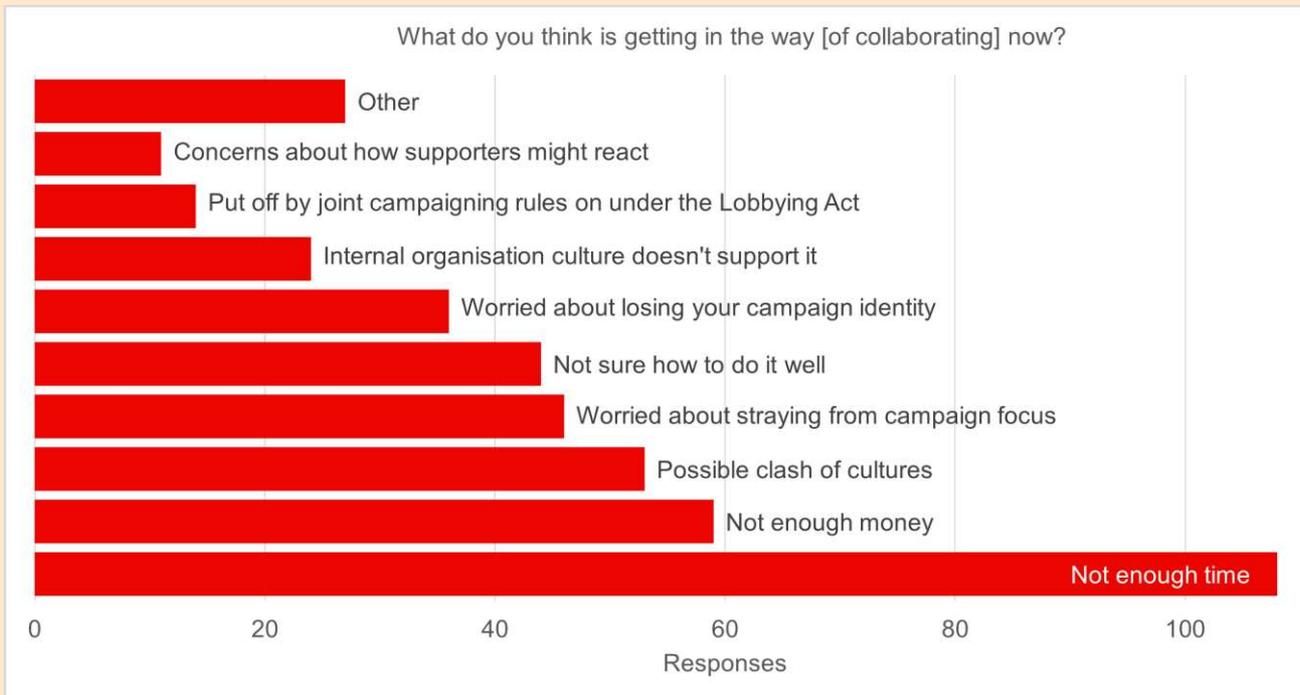


The greatest barrier to collaboration is capacity, with respondents citing 'not enough time' (70%) and 'not enough money' (38%). Other barriers include perceived risks, such as a potential culture clash (37%) or straying from campaign focus (30%), and lack of knowledge about how to do it well (29%). Regulatory and audience-reaction worries exist but are not the main blockers. This suggests that the effective ways to unlock more collaboration might include:

- reducing the coordination load (e.g. lightweight partnership processes, ready-to-use templates or memoranda of understanding, clearer roles)
- embracing strength-based collaboration (i.e. each participant contributes according to their own strengths and capacity)
- de-risking collaboration (e.g. guidance on governance, culture fit, and joint planning)
- making room for collaboration as part of resource planning, rather than spreading campaigners thinner and thinner.

## 3. Repetition, persistence, and tenacity

Many respondents are keen to underline that change can take a long time, so it's important to stick to your goal, for years if necessary. This applies whether your aim is big legislative change, fine policy shifts, or local implementation.

> *"campaigning takes a long time (decades in this case), and requires thinking out of the box and across disciplines…"*

*"Slow patient effort over a long time, not giving up, being persistent in finding answers to problems as they arose."*

*"I was just stubborn and wouldn't stop complaining to the local council about why their suggested policy change was discrimination. Eventually they stopped trying to implement it in our area."*

## 4. Build long-term relationships, networks & conversations

Whether building community trust, professional respect, an effective collaboration, or an energetic movement, relationships lie at the heart of your success. Respondents highlight the importance of cultivating them over the longer-term, if possible, not just to meet immediate needs.

*"Long-term work alongside the local authority, plus wider campaigning."*
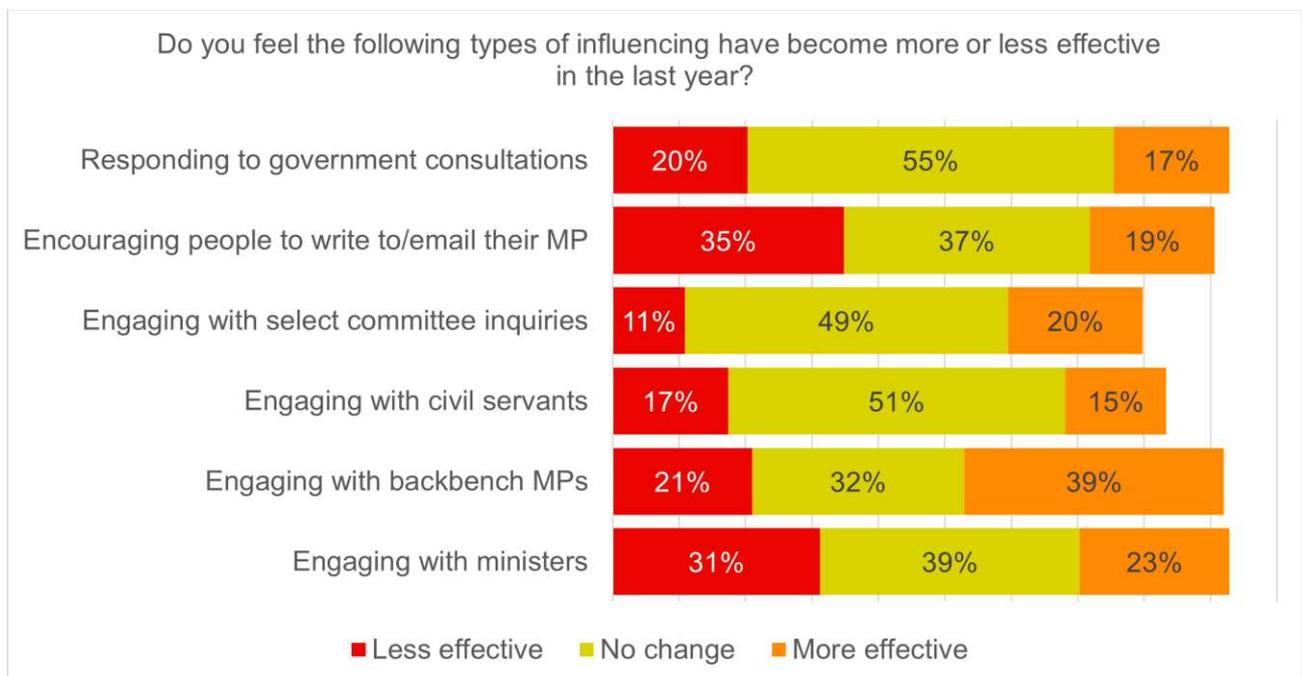*"Relationships are key!"*
*"We had a brilliant event to introduce refugees and people in local communities –worked because of the strength of relationships built up over time."*
*"Really good relationship building with civil servants who became advocates."*

## 6.2. Influencing the UK Government and Parliament in 2025

83% of campaigners who responded to the survey say their campaigns try to influence the UK Government in some way.

The most common strategies for targeting the UK Government in 2025 are engaging with ministers and responding to consultations. Both are used by 92.8% of campaigners, though 20% and 31% feel that influencing in this way is becoming less effective. This trend is most significant for encouraging people to contact their MP (35% say it's now less effective). The biggest improvement was engaging with backbench MPs (39% say it's now more effective).

**Do you feel the following types of influencing have become more or less effective in the last year?**

| | Less effective | No change | More effective |
|---|---|---|---|
| Responding to government consultations | 20% | 55% | 17% |
| Encouraging people to write to/email their MP | 35% | 37% | 19% |
| Engaging with select committee inquiries | 11% | 49% | 20% |
| Engaging with civil servants | 17% | 51% | 15% |
| Engaging with backbench MPs | 21% | 32% | 39% |
| Engaging with ministers | 31% | 39% | 23% |

## 6.3. Campaign targets and tactics in 2025

We asked whether campaigners had maintained, increased or decreased their focus on five common campaign targets and ten common campaigns approaches in 2025. The graphs below show the number of responses in each category.

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### Spotlight on devolution in 2026

We asked about the latest round of devolution to national governments, local authorities and regional mayors. Around a quarter of campaigners (28%) say they are feeling the impact. The results highlight the huge amount of uncertainty this process has created for campaigners and reveals some of the immediate challenges and opportunities.

**1. Priority decision-makers will change.** For many campaigners, a whole new raft of knowledge and relationships will need to be built.

**2. Shifting the balance from Westminster to local/ regional presents opportunities.** A whole new set of election cycles offer new points of pressure and to chances mobilise around local issues and local decision-making powers.

**3. Depending on the issue, things are about to get simpler or much more complicated.** Clearly it depends on the issue, some campaigners are excited, others worry about how they will manage to influence both Westminster and their national/ local/ regional administrations.

**4. Shifting the balance from Westminster to local/ regional puts pressure on knowledge, capacity and budgets.** Organisations are grappling with how much resource to dedicate to regional/ local decision-making versus national. Time is needed to build new relationships. The infrastructure for local mobilisation, networks, or coalitions needs to be created.

**5. The power dynamic between devolved politicians and the Government needs to be better understood.** Regional politicians might press for new powers that allow them to address a problem that is better tackled at a more local level.
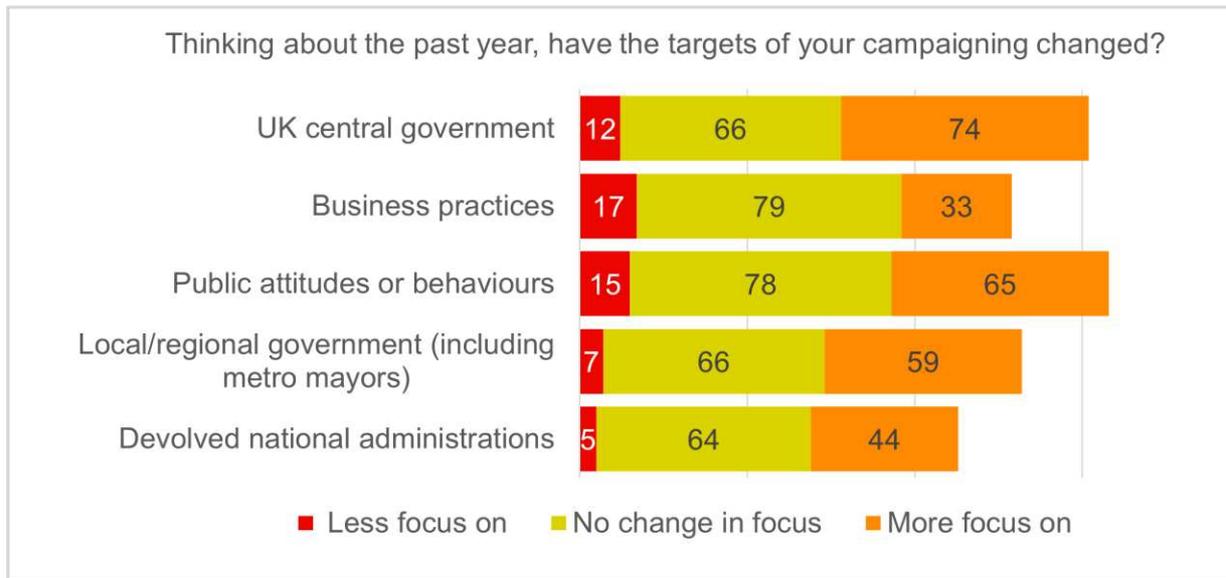
> *"Housing is devolved, but welfare isn't. That makes it harder for us to campaign for effective solutions to the housing emergency."*
> *"…there's a huge focus on influencing the UK Government, and so there's been some resistance when our approach needed to change."*
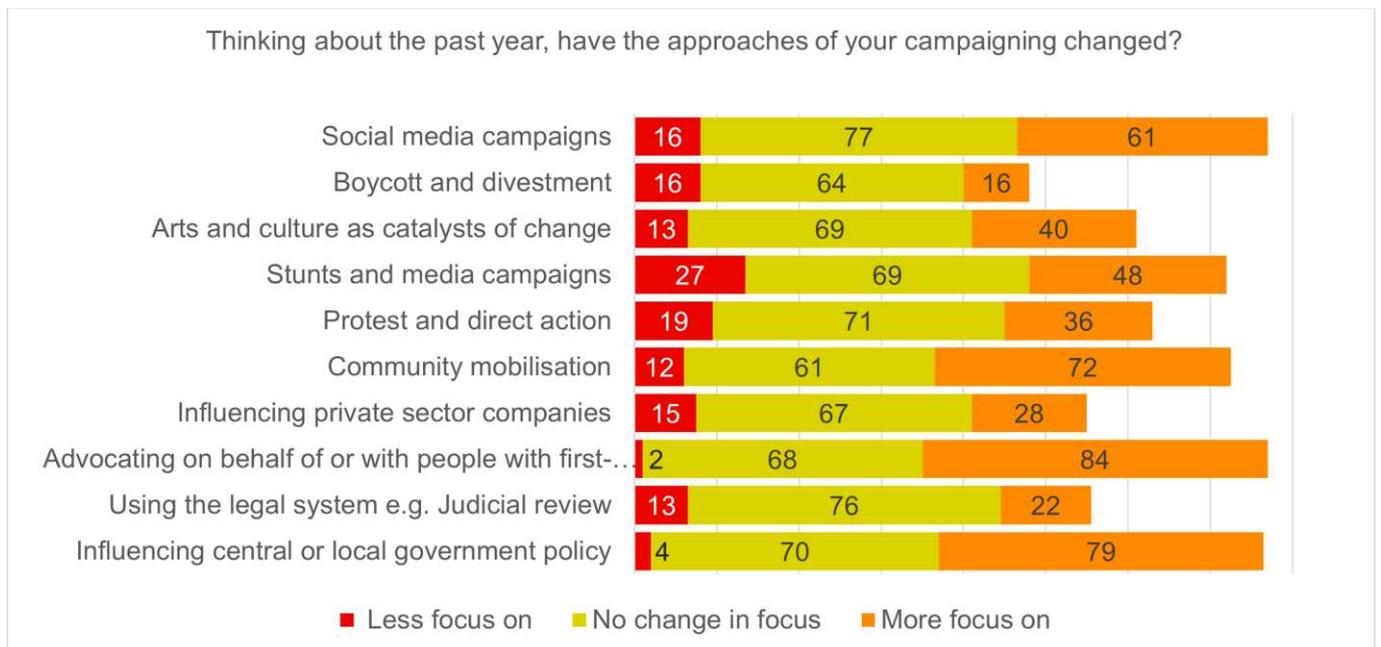> *"There's an opportunity for mayors to use their mandates to call for powers and make life harder for the government."*

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In almost every category, the overwhelming majority report that focus has been maintained or increased, with only a small handful reporting a shift away from a target. Having examined the threats to campaigning we are reasonably sure there has not been an increase in overall campaigning capacity. This begs the question, 'are we stretching campaigners too thin?' More critically, just as organisations may be avoiding important decisions about their response to the national picture, does the same hold true when it comes to the focus on national versus

regional/ local influencing? As the campaigning environment reaches new levels of complexity, is it sensible to try to sustain 'business as usual'?



Thinking about the past year, have the targets of your campaigning changed?

| | Less focus on | No change in focus | More focus on |
|---|---|---|---|
| UK central government | 12 | 66 | 74 |
| Business practices | 17 | 79 | 33 |
| Public attitudes or behaviours | 15 | 78 | 65 |
| Local/regional government (including metro mayors) | 7 | 66 | 59 |
| Devolved national administrations | 5 | 64 | 44 |

92% of respondents identify UK Central Government as a target, however the most popular target for campaigns was the public with 95% of respondents seeing this category as relevant for them. The target that has seen the greatest reduction in focus is business practices, although this is still a small drop (17% of respondents). The graph illustrates the overall trend to expand out to include more targets.



Thinking about the past year, have the approaches of your campaigning changed?

| | Less focus on | No change in focus | More focus on |
|---|---|---|---|
| Social media campaigns | 16 | 77 | 61 |
| Boycott and divestment | 16 | 64 | 16 |
| Arts and culture as catalysts of change | 13 | 69 | 40 |
| Stunts and media campaigns | 27 | 69 | 48 |
| Protest and direct action | 19 | 71 | 36 |
| Community mobilisation | 12 | 61 | 72 |
| Influencing private sector companies | 15 | 67 | 28 |
| Advocating on behalf of or with people with first-... | 2 | 68 | 84 |
| Using the legal system e.g. Judicial review | 13 | 76 | 22 |
| Influencing central or local government policy | 4 | 70 | 79 |

The top three approaches where campaigners are increasing their focus are: advocating on behalf of people with first-hand experience of an issue (84 responses); influencing central or local government policy (79 responses); and community mobilisation (72 responses). The approaches with the biggest decrease in focus are, perhaps unsurprisingly, stunts and media campaigns (27 responses) and protest and direct action (19 responses).

# 7. Strengthening the UK's social change ecosystem: the road ahead

During our analysis of campaigners' responses, we repeatedly observed that challenges are becoming more complicated, without a clear solution within organisations' existing approaches, and that they are 'stacking', more campaigners seemed to be dealing multiple challenges than we have seen in the past. Perhaps most striking has been the fragility of the belief that change is possible, with a fifth of campaigners citing this as a threat to their campaigning activities.

And yet we also see campaigners at their most defiant, with a record 100% of changemakers saying campaigning is legitimate and 98% that it is necessary to change policy, law, attitudes, and behaviours for a more hopeful and just future.

In the light of these results and our wider role in supporting, championing and connecting the campaigns community, SMK is focusing our strategy on the following areas.

1. **Collaboration and coalition building.** From formal coalitions to creative collaborations we will equip and connect campaigners to tackle the complex challenges no organisation can address alone.

2. **Innovation and adaptation.** We will explore new tactics, technologies and ways of working that help campaigners adapt to a fast-changing environment, protect democratic participation and seize emerging opportunities.

3. **Bridging and belonging**. We will focus on campaigning that builds community agency and values diverse voices, fostering empathy, connection and dignity across our differences

Each strategic priority is designed to strengthen the others, creating campaigning that is more connected, more imaginative and more grounded in people's real lives.

Collaboration and coalition building gives campaigners the shared power and alignment needed to take on complex challenges. Innovation and adaptation ensure those collaborations can respond creatively and effectively to a fast-changing world. Bridging and belonging roots both in the lived experience, dignity and agency of the communities most affected.

We said in our introduction that the challenges we face as a society need to be met on multiple fronts. They are both high tech and rooted in basic human interactions. They require both innovation and a refusal to let some basic standards decline.

If 'business as usual' isn't working, what will? The clue that campaigners are giving us in this survey lies in their conscious pursuit of hope that change is possible, even in the face of despair. Let hope make you more ambitious about your contribution, braver about the decisions you take. Let it shape the way you think, plan, and invest your efforts and resources.

Our hope at SMK is that this moment of possibility already has enough momentum to become a moment of evolution. We are choosing to play our part by adjusting our strategy to respond to the times we are in – focusing on supporting collaboration, innovation, and belonging.

Through the lens of your mission, what will you choose to do differently?

# 8. Methodology

The SMK Annual Campaigner and Changemaker Survey 2025 was conducted on Microsoft Forms and analysed by the SMK team and Chloe Hardy, policy and campaigns consultant, with AI support. All personal or identifying data separated from the core survey questions and processed in line with our Data Protection Policy.

Full results are available on the SMK website **here**.

## 8.1. About our campaigners

We are extremely grateful to all 166 members of the campaigning community who responded to this survey. We asked each respondent to tell us where and how they work, what type of campaigning they do, and how they identify their changemaking.

This year the majority of respondents were based in England (92.2%). 74% of respondents are paid for their campaigning work, 10% are paid sometimes, and 16% are unpaid. Of those who are paid for their campaign work, 79% work in registered charities, and they are nearly evenly split among seniority levels (Officer, Manager, and Directors/CEOs). 61.6% of those working in an organisation report a turnover of over £1 million per year, with most of the remaining reporting over £100k.

92% are campaigning to change laws, 75% are campaigning to change behaviours and attitudes, 55% are campaigning to change public services and 81% of campaigners are working across multiple areas of social change. Thank you for the awesome work you do.

## 8.2. About SMK

The Sheila McKechnie Foundation (SMK) was set up in June 2005 in memory of legendary campaigner, Sheila McKechnie. For over two decades, we have worked with a wide variety of people, causes and organisations to find their power as changemakers – as campaigners.

Our mission is to strengthen campaigning by championing excellence and building a connected, resilient community of changemakers fuelled by the hope that change is possible. Our work is underpinned by the values of hope, generosity and courage. We are very grateful to Bates Wells for supporting and championing this report.

## 8.3. About Bates Wells

We're a different kind of law firm with impact at our heart. We were the first UK law firm to become a B Corp - balancing our decisions on our people, clients, suppliers, community, and the environment with making a profit - and are the highest scoring global law firm in the B Corp community. Our pragmatic legal advice is coupled with a will to influence positive social and environmental change in law, policy and practice.

We're recognised as a market-leading firm for charities and campaigning organisations. Members of our specialised Politics, Elections and Campaigning team are recommended by independent legal directory Chambers UK for both Charities and Parliamentary & Public Affairs: Electoral Law. Whatever your campaigning goals, Bates Wells has the experience and commitment to help you deliver.

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