

PRESS RELEASE

CAMPAIGNERS MORE CONFIDENT, DESPITE PRESSURE FROM POLITICIANS

Campaigners and change-makers feel the public are becoming more positive about their work, according to the latest Sheila McKechnie Foundation (SMK) Campaigner Survey. This is despite reporting increasingly negative attitudes amongst politicians and the media.

After years of feeling the ‘chilling effect’ of legislation like the Lobbying Act, and restrictions created by ‘anti-advocacy clauses’ in grant contracts, it seems that campaigners are recovering their voice and confidence. Overall, 30% said things had got better in the past year, while 36% said things had got worse (this is down from 49% in 2018).

Sector responses

Sue Tibballs, Chief Executive of the Sheila McKechnie Foundation, said:

“It is brilliant to see civil society rallying and recovering its confidence to campaign after a long period of feeling conflicted and constrained. Conditions put on public funding have made it difficult for charities to speak up, and the sector has come under sustained pressure from politicians and regulators to step away from political debate. The UK’s civic space is now rated as ‘narrowed’.”

“We believe civil society campaigning is a vital part of public debate and of a healthy democracy. Charities exist not just to pick up the pieces of failing systems, but to bear witness to these impacts and argue for changes in attitudes, policy and law.

“Civil society is where most radical social change proceeds from - not from governments. Constraining civil society is not just anti-democratic. It weakens our chances of addressing the very many challenges we face - from polarisation to climate change. SMK will keep working to promote a braver, more united, civil society voice and identity.”

Polly Neate, Chief Executive of Shelter, said:

“Campaigning is not an added extra to our ‘real’ work – it’s a vital part of it. Our job is to defend everyone’s right to a safe home. That means offering advice and support to millions of people through our frontline services, as well as changing the attitudes, laws, political decisions and systems which can threaten that right. We are proud to campaign for the longer-term solutions that hopefully mean one day no-one will have to turn to us for help. The public are OK with that..”

Rita Chadha, Chief Executive of the Small Charities Coalition, said:

“When a charity is inspired to campaign for wider change by its own mission, we support its right to do so. Charities offer help to people who need it now, but should feel no shame about working towards a future in which that help isn’t necessary. We’re delighted that change-makers are starting to see that the public understands it’s part of our role.”

Public and political attitudes at odds

48% believe that public attitudes to campaigning have become more positive in the past year.

*"It seems like more people and groups are campaigning for change (Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion) and also both sides of the Brexit decision."*ⁱⁱ

However, campaigners report increasingly negative attitudes amongst politicians (45%) and the media (41%) over the past year.

Is concern about legitimacy of campaigning lifting?

87% of respondents believe the legitimacy of campaigning by civil society is under threat, which is down from 93% in 2018. 36% say things have got worse in the past year, down from 49% in 2018.

What is driving the change?

Last year, campaigners called for greater solidarity and bravery across the sector. This year, where respondents said they thought things had got better for campaigning, we asked them why. They mentioned:

1. Increased public action (e.g. XR, #MeToo, Brexit) and wins (e.g. period poverty, mental health): *"Campaigners like Greta Thunberg are motivating a new generation of campaigners."*
2. Increased collaboration: *"As a sector we have a louder stronger voice, we are working more collaboratively on the issues that matter the most."*
3. New Electoral Commission guidance

Where they told us things had got worse, we asked them why. They mentioned:

1. Lack of space for other issues while politicians and public are distracted by political upheaval and Brexit: *"Brexit has sucked the life out of policy makers for anything else"*
2. A hostile environment for campaigning (attitudes of politicians and regulators): *"The ongoing polarisation of UK society and the dismissing of evidence-based policy-making is also affecting the ability to campaign effectively."*
3. Lack of funding: *"due to cuts many civil society groups are keeping heads down"*
4. Organisation attitudes: *"I feel like many organisations have just given up and don't want to rock the boat"*

What are the threats?

This year, the top three factors that respondents say threaten the legitimacy of campaigning are:

- Conditions on funding that prevent lobbying, campaigning or advocacy (57%)
- Civil society isn't as confident and proud about its right to campaign as it should be (53%)
- General lack of awareness about what civil society campaigning has achieved (52%)

The proportion expressing concern about the Lobbying Act has dropped from 64% in 2018 to 48% in 2019.

“...[it’s] still not a great situation but the recent Electoral Commission guidance ... makes it clear that charity campaigning is welcome and legitimate”

A similar number cite negative media coverage, down to 48% in 2019 from 66% in 2018. This is reflected in the 35% in 2019 who say they are concerned about a negative public view of civil society campaigning, also down from 52% in 2018.

Focus returns to Westminster

After last year’s shift away from Westminster and Whitehall, it seems that change-makers are returning their attention to government and parliament. The numbers reporting that they are campaigning to influence legislation is 67% (up from 52% in 2018).

“MPs are listening more”

The number working to change central or local government policy remains at 78%, down from 86% in 2017.

2019 saw a drop in the number who say they are advocating for a particular group (57%) or for their service users (52%). Both are down from 66% and 64% respectively in 2018. Those targeting private sector companies remains stable at 37%.

Are we still a sector divided?

Last year, it seemed the sector was becoming polarised between those who responded to an increasingly hostile environment with greater caution and those who re-dedicated their organisations to fearlessly campaigning.

“I think we are seeing a revival of campaigning and activism particularly from small/independent grassroots organisations - take Extinction Rebellion and the youth strikes as an example.

This is positive and wonderful see. Where I see it getting worse is for large well-established organisations where brand and fundraising are more important than change.”

This year, only 12% report that they or their organisation are campaigning less – half that in 2018. Similar to last year, over a third (36%) say they are now campaigning more – a threefold rise on 2017 and holding steady.

38% report that boards and senior leaders are more positive towards campaigning than this time last year and 43% that other colleagues have a more positive attitude.

Only 9% report a more negative attitude to campaigning amongst trustees and senior leaders, compared to the 37% who reported their boards were more cautious about campaigning last year.

Perceptions of funders, both public and independent, remain largely unchanged. Just 6% report more positive attitudes to campaigning among public funders, and only 16% say independent funders are more positive.

SMK's annual campaigner's survey offers specialist insights from a distinctive group of experts from across the UK. 189 campaigners and change-makers were surveyed this year – the highest since the survey began in 2016.

ENDS

NOTES FOR EDITORS

About the survey: 189 individuals, 87% based in England, in a mixture of job roles:

- Chief Executive 13%
- Trustee or chairperson 6%
- Head or Director 19%
- Manager 23%
- Officer or assistant 18%
- Other 21%

Types of organisation.

- 60% in a registered charity.
- 18% in a community/ voluntary group.
- 38% in organisations with an income over £1m
- 26% in organisations with an income under £50k

ABOUT THE SHEILA MCKECHNIE FOUNDATION (SMK)

The Sheila McKechnie Foundation (SMK) exists to build a more confident and powerful civil society where people work together to drive transformational change.

We do this in three ways:

We CHAMPION: we promote and defend civil society's right to drive change, and celebrate success through the SMK National Campaigner Awards

We CONVENE: we bring together those pursuing change to understand what's working and what's not, and then develop insights and tools that can strengthen future efforts.

We CAPACITY BUILD: we offer training and consultancy to those seeking to effect change from individuals and groups in the community to large civil society organisations (CSOs)

Our approach

For more information please contact Emma Boyd, Head of Marketing and Communications/
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ⁱ Civicus Monitor – <https://monitor.civicus.org/>

ⁱⁱ Unless otherwise stated, quotes in italics are from survey respondents