

# We Belong Campaign evaluation

How a 'small but mighty' team of young migrants won a fairer, shorter, path to settlement.

Written by [Fiona Bawdon](#)  
April 2022

## About We Belong

We Belong was set up in 2019 having evolved out of Let us Learn – the earlier campaign by Just for Kids Law. We Belong is the first UK-wide campaign organisation to be run by and for young migrants. Under the leadership of CEO Chrisann Jarrett, we work with young people who migrated to the UK as children and are still subject to Home Office control, despite having grown up here.

[www.webelong.org.uk](http://www.webelong.org.uk)

## About the author

Fiona Bawdon is a legal affairs journalist and researcher. She is founder and director of Impact - Law for Social Justice, and has been comms consultant to We Belong, and before that to Let us Learn, since 2014. She first wrote about the impact of LLR on young migrants' lives in 2014 in 'Chasing Status: If not British, then what am I?'<sup>1</sup> (Legal Action Group).

## About this report:

Thanks to Unbound Philanthropy for funding this report. This evaluation is based on interviews with some of the people who played key roles in the campaign. Heartfelt thanks to the following for not just for giving me their time, but doing it with great enthusiasm and making such thoughtful and interesting interviewees:

Chrisann Jarrett; Dami Makinde; Tashi Tahir; Kimberly Garande; Ciara Redmond; Ijeoma Moore; Zino Akaka; Tosin Lawal; Maheraj Lian; Anita Hurrell; Marianne Lagrue; Laura Taylor; Roopa Tanna; Anna Skehan; Sarah Lambert; Aidan Rylatt, Tim Loughton MP.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.lag.org.uk/Resources/javascript/pdfjs/web/viewer.html?file=?fileid%3d-17369>

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# 1. Introduction: The We Belong report I never dared hope to write



**Fiona Bawdon**

*Journalist, researcher, and  
comms consultant, We Belong*

This is the fourth report I have written for We Belong<sup>2</sup> (or its previous incarnation, Let us Learn). It is also the report I never dared hope I would be writing.

The previous three reports<sup>3</sup> told, in the words of young migrants, how their lives, prospects, and mental and physical wellbeing were being blighted by the cost, length and precariousness of their 10-year limited leave to remain (LLR) path to settlement in the UK.

In 2019, I described LLR as ‘a harsh, unforgiving’ process, ‘that sows division and fear, damages mental health, limits life chances and condemns even the hardest-working families to at least a decade of intense financial strain’.

Each of those three previous reports concluded by calling for ‘a five-year path to settlement (permanent status) for those who have lived in the UK for half of their lives or more’.

Today, thanks to We Belong’s tenacious, spirited and principled campaigning, that primary aim has been achieved.

In October 2021, the Home Office published a ‘concession’ to the family immigration rules<sup>4</sup>, cutting the length of time that young adults will spend on the LLR route from 10 years to five. In June 2022, that change will become part of the Immigration Rules.

By any measure, it is a remarkable achievement for a young (in all senses) organisation, with a small staff and modest resources.

Written following We Belong’s campaign success, this report serves a very different purpose from its predecessors. Rather than making the case for change, it is an evaluation of how that change was brought about. It is an analysis of how (to quote We Belong CEO Chrisann Jarrett) a ‘small but mighty team of employees, young activists and allies’ succeeded in convincing our government of the rightness of its cause, and that fairness demanded reform to LLR.

Some of the young migrants interviewed for this report or their close family members, will be among the earliest to benefit from the change that they did so much to bring about. For those who have held LLR for at least five years, whose current LLR is soon to expire, rather than applying for another 30-month tranche of leave, they can now apply for *indefinite* leave to remain (ILR). ILR brings not just recognition of being permanently settled in the UK, but also freedom from further Home Office control. It will bring the freedom to finally plan their futures with confidence in the country they have long called home. In another year - and on payment of a further substantial fee - they can apply for British citizenship.

As Tashi Tahir, We Belong’s parliamentary officer who spearheaded the campaign, puts it: ‘Being free from immigration control is one of the best things for enabling young people to achieve their potential.’

2 We Belong started life as the Let us Learn campaign in 2014, which was part of Just for Kids Law. In this report, references to We Belong may be used interchangeably at times.

3 Normality is a Luxury, July 2019; We Belong Mental Health Check, November 2020; The Deintegration Generation, November 2021

4 Concession to the family Immigration Rules for granting longer periods of leave and early indefinite leave to remain, Version 2, 20 December 2021

## THE WE BELONG 'VIRTUOUS CIRCLE'

In early 2015, Dami Makinde was looking online for scholarships, after learning she was ineligible for a student loan. She came across a Guardian article about Chrisann Jarrett, and how Just for Kids Law (JfK) had helped her secure funding to take up her place at LSE. Dami says: 'I thought, oh great! There's an organisation, finally, that is helping people. Maybe they can help me, too.' JfK couldn't offer scholarships, but suggested Dami get involved in the then embryonic Let us Learn campaign. A few months later, Dami became Let us Learn's first paid member of staff as projects officer.

Later that same year, Kimberly Garande,<sup>18</sup> also discovered she was ineligible for a student loan. At her mum's urging, Kimberly contacted Just for Kids Law, and was invited to a meeting. Kimberly says: 'The first person I met was Dami and she has this bright smile. She was beaming.' That greeting had an immediate effect. Kimberly had been left 'feeling small' because of her situation. But after being welcomed so warmly by Dami and the rest of the group she didn't feel small any longer. Kimberly went on to fund herself through university (which involved her and her mum working multiple jobs to cover the costs). In October 2019, after graduating, Kimberly became We Belong's outreach officer. She is now the first port of call for young people contacting We Belong. 'I remember how nervous I was. I always try to reflect how I was treated and the patience that I was given, and the time I was given to settle.'

On a busy day, Kimberly can speak to up to 10 young migrants. In early 2021, she heard from Maheraj Lian, who lives in east London with his family. Maheraj won a scholarship to Eton College, and wants to be a doctor, so was devastated to find he couldn't get a student loan to go to university. Kimberly told him her story, and that he wasn't alone. Maheraj is now open with his friends about his situation and helping to run We Belong's Emerging Young Leaders training course. He also appeared in the BBC Panorama documentary 'Am I British?'

Tashi Tahir first contacted Let us Learn in 2014. She had just won a scholarship to study maths at St Andrews University, Scotland, plus a 'self-development' award from the same charitable trust. Tashi wanted Let us Learn to have the award, and spend it to help other young migrants like her. We used it to make our highly-praised Young, Gifted and Blocked film, which played a key part in our successful university scholarship campaign.

After completing her degree and a short spell working in fashion, Tashi became We Belong's parliamentary officer in 2020, and played a leading role in its recent campaign success.

Inevitably, the timing of the concession was not so lucky for everyone I spoke to. A harsh reality of what We Belong CEO Chrisann Jarrett calls 'lived experience activism' is that, even with a significant campaign win, the rigidity of the immigration system means it will be several years before some of those involved in the campaign can benefit from the Home Office's 'concession' (We Belong thinks of it as more of a 'correction') - during which time they will continue to live with 'temporary' status, severe financial strain, and be at risk of gate-keeping, when they try to access services.

This report will look at the mix of campaign tools, tactics, values, resources, and expertise (in house and external) that led to We Belong's success. It will try to unpick what makes We Belong, in the words of one immigration lawyer interviewed, 'the biggest success story of the sector that I've worked in for what is now 10-15 years'.

To understand We Belong's success, it's important to understand its origins. It came into being - first as the Let us Learn campaign and then as an independent, young-migrant led

## WE BELONG CAMPAIGN MILESTONES

### 2012

Limited Leave to Remain (LLR) creates 10-year path to settlement; designates anyone with LLR as an 'international student' (no student loan; not eligible for 'home student' fees).

### 2014

Let us Learn campaign founded, as part of Just for Kids Law.

Cost of LLR is £601.

### 2015

July - Supreme Court (Tigere) rules blanket ban on student loans for everyone with LLR is unlawful. Let us Learn act as intervenors in the case.

Annual Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS) introduced.

Let us Learn launches 'Young, Gifted and Blocked' campaign to increase the number of scholarships for young migrants with LLR.

### 2016

November - Let us Learn member Ijeoma Moore speaks at London mayoral election hustings, calling for the next mayor to focus on rights of young migrants.

### 2017

Dami Makinde seconded to Greater London Authority (GLA) for a year.

Let us Learn switches campaign focus away from education to reform of LLR ('a fairer, more affordable route to settlement').

Total cost of LLR (IHS and Home Office fee) is £1,493.

organisation - to fill a gap. It was needed because, at the time, none of the longer-standing migrants' rights groups were focusing on (or necessarily aware of) the problems faced by young people, who had lived in the UK since a young age, and were on the 10-year LLR path to settlement.

This was in no way a failing on any organisation's part - many of those with LLR barely thought of themselves as migrants - and, crucially, it left a space where We Belong could take root. As a result, We Belong was able to carve out for itself what Chrisann describes as 'a very neat spot'.

This was an opportunity for a group of young migrants to define themselves, rather than be defined by others; to create an organisation in their own image; become their own experts and leaders; and set their own campaign priorities.

The group had originally come together over the issue of access to university, but with the introduction of the Immigration Health Surcharge, and as some members started to make their first LLR renewals, the mood in the group shifted. Chrisann says: 'We realised that our journey of hardship was only just beginning. That wasn't something we had appreciated before, as we were so focused on student finance, and thought we could handle everything else.'

It dawned on the group that interactions with the Home Office 'would not only disrupt our time at uni but remain a constant demanding and unwanted companion for many years afterwards', as Chrisann puts in her report<sup>5</sup> reflecting on We Belong's success.

As a result, the focal point of We Belong's campaign shifted to reforming the LLR process itself.

At each stage of the ensuing campaign, every decision - large or small - was made by young migrants themselves; shaped by their direct experiences, and those of the cohort they represented.

**2018**

- April - Windrush Scandal breaks in UK press.

- Chrisann Jarrett seconded to GLA for a year; leads on GLA response to Windrush Lessons Learned Review

**2019**

- Let us Learn meeting with Immigration Minister Caroline Nokes MP.

- We Belong founded - UK's first nationwide young-migrant-led campaigning organisation.

- Law Commission consultation on simplifying Immigration Rules; We Belong members share their experiences of LLR with Law Commission lawyers.

- April - Home Office fees frozen; cost of IHS doubles; total cost of LLR is £2,033.

**2020**

- March - Tashi Tahir appointed as We Belong parliamentary officer.

- April - Government announces total cost of LLR will increase to £2,593 in October.

- September - We Belong's parliamentary event: panellists include Conservative MPs Tim Loughton and Laura Farris; and Ian Birrell, journalist and former speechwriter for David Cameron. We Belong starts regular meetings with senior civil servants to discuss changes to LLR.

- September - Islington Law Centre (ILC) starts legal challenge to LLR

- November - We Belong gives evidence to Home Affairs Select Committee

- December - We Belong meets immigration minister Kevin Foster.

We Belong has brought its own unique blend of passion and pragmatism, urgency and realism, to all aspects of its campaigning. It stayed true to its founding principles of integrity and boldness, while recognising that to bring about change through the parliamentary process, it would need the support of Conservative MPs and to tailor its tactics and messaging accordingly.

It did this to great effect. Then Immigration Minister Caroline Nokes reported to colleagues after she met the Let us Learn team in 2019 that 'they seemed like grafters' (although the meeting itself achieved little directly). They made a similar impression on former Children's Minister (and Brexiteer) Tim Loughton when he met them in 2020. Tim Loughton says he was 'instantly exceedingly impressed with how articulate and impressive they were and the strength of their case'.

Tim Loughton coming on board was a pivotal moment in the campaign - but could just as easily not have happened. We Belong invited him to speak at its 2020 parliamentary event, but received a brief reply from his assistant, saying the MP regretted he had another engagement that day 'as otherwise he would have been interested in doing this'. This was all the encouragement We Belong needed. Whereas a more jaded organisation might have assumed they were being given a polite brush off, We Belong took the expression of regret at face value, and changed the date to one that he could attend. What could have been an act of naivety turned out to be a tactical masterstroke.

Aidan Rylatt, account director at Principle Consulting, who first worked with We Belong in 2018, says not only was Tim Loughton's support an early sign that 'we can appeal to Conservatives'; but after attending We Belong's parliamentary event, the MP would go on to become a wholehearted champion of We Belong's cause. Aidan says he was 'absolutely instrumental in getting them the meeting with the Home Affairs Select Committee, and that really moved the campaign forward. And then also getting it on the radar of Kevin Foster.'

**2021**

April - We Belong gives written evidence in support of ILC legal challenge.

April - We Belong Westminster Hall debate on rising cost of immigration fees, initiated by Meg Hillier MP; immigration minister Kevin Foster commits to seeking solutions for We Belong cohort.

May - BBC Panorama documentary 'Am I British?' airs, featuring three members of We Belong.

1 October - Home Office seeks to settle legal case with ILC; announces it will be publishing a 'concession' to give the change immediate effect.

20 October - Home Office concession published

5 November - Government minister makes first public commitment to change LLR in 2022.

20 December - Home Office extends concession to over 25s, after further discussions with We Belong and ILC.

**2022**

June - Immigration Rules due to change.

We Belong brought the same lack of cynicism that had served it so well with Tim Loughton to its dealings with Home Office. Its approach was to be constructive and transparent: sharing information with civil servants, taking their advice, and working collaboratively, where possible.

For all the goodwill on display by the Home Office, We Belong also took steps to protect its position in the event warm words did not translate into changes to LLR.

These steps included co-founder and then co-CEO Dami Makinde providing witness statements to support a legal challenge to the 10-year route being brought by Islington Law Centre; parliamentary officer Tashi Tahir working to mobilise its members to write to their MPs to keep up the pressure on the Home Office; and in October 2021, tabling a parliamentary amendment to the Nationality and Borders Bill, to get on record what they were being told in private about the Home Office's intention to change LLR.

Sarah Lambert, the public affairs expert brought in to support We Belong to influence the bill, says the amendment tabled as a result was 'insurance for the commitment they'd had behind closed doors'. The amendment was never expected to pass; but, as hoped, 'secured a commitment on the record from the minister that they had the intention to change the rules'.

One of We Belong's strengths was its ability to identify the limits of its knowledge and when it would benefit from external expertise from the likes of Aidan, Sarah, and others. Chrisann says: 'We just didn't want to get things wrong. Each time we had external help, it was responding to a need, because we'd already exhausted previous levers.' Dami says: 'If you want to be successful, the best thing you can do is to take help.' She adds that We Belong's funders were always supportive in this respect.

All CEOs want their organisations to succeed. In We Belong's case the desire for change had the additional urgency and focus that comes from not just being led by young migrants, but from its direct work supporting those whose



university plans have just been blown off course, and its strong ties to its wider membership.

Chrisann says it is the community building aspect of its work that ‘really sustained us and remained constant, even though we were pivoting between campaigns and changing focus’. It was also what kept We Belong coming back to its core issue: the impact of the 10-year LLR route on young migrants who had lived in the UK most of their lives.

Chrisann says: ‘We could have easily been co-opted as a campaign to just focus on citizenship. I think that was an example of where partnership or collaboration was very performative. It went against what we stood for.’

We Belong found its strength was in plotting its own path, and collaborating with organisations when there was genuine commonality of interest and purpose. It did this to powerful effect with Islington Law Centre (in order to settle the case, the government agreed to bring in the promised change to LLR a year earlier than it originally intended, see page 21); and Coram Children’s Legal Centre (CCLC), with which We Belong has found a real meeting of minds.

Alongside lived-experience leadership, direct work, and community building, the other key weapon in We Belong’s armoury has been its emphasis on the individual stories of young migrants, who are living with LLR.

Ijeoma Moore, who has been central to the campaign over many years, speaking on public platforms and doing multiple media interviews, is a strong believer in the power of this approach: ‘All these politicians hearing our stories, is why they make the decisions they do make. Although our stories are our own, it’s so much more than that. And we have to take ownership of making it as powerful as it can be.’

Tosin Lawal, another longstanding member of the group, says his meeting with immigration minister Kevin Foster was ‘probably the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do. I didn’t want to say the wrong thing, something that would trigger him.’ Tosin was there to tell his personal story, but was aware that the outcome of the meeting could affect thousands and thousands of other young people.

The lesson from We Belong’s campaign is that sharing stories, making the political personal, can be highly effective advocacy tool, but it needs to be done with great care, appropriate preparation and support - and is never without cost to the individual. Dami says: ‘It’s reliving the hurt, the pain, the shame, and the way people saw you. That for me would be the downside of telling your story, especially if you’re having to tell it over and over again.’

Nor is storytelling a panacea. Unless it is part of a broader, carefully plotted, multi-pronged and sustained campaign, it is unlikely to achieve anything - but may still risk re-traumatising the person telling their story. As Zino Akaka, another long-term and active member of We Belong, says: ‘One article is not going to change Boris Johnson’s mind in one day.’

For We Belong, story telling is part of its DNA, rather than a bolt-on. Chrisann describes it as using ‘our lived experience narrative as a mobilisation tool, and to develop a community of young migrants facing a shared injustice’. At We Belong’s monthly gatherings, young migrants get to hear the stories of other young migrants, and can be invited to tell their own. By the time the likes of Zino, Tosin, or Ijeoma shared their experiences with journalists or politicians, they would have already been supported to share them within the group, probably multiple times, to help build their levels of confidence and comfort.

We Belong’s success will likely drive further interest among funders in supporting organisations or projects that involve those with direct experience of an issue. We Belong’s campaign should not just be seen as an incentive for this, but also a cautionary tale. You cannot involve those with lived experience lightly or for free. Young activists need to be paid for their time, just like everyone else. The power dynamics can be tricky, even if an organisation is led by people with lived experience. The kind of preparation and community building needed will require funding; wellbeing support will be vital. Chrisann estimates that We Belong has only had around £5,000 of funding ear-marked for wellbeing support, and that was to cover both young people and staff. ‘That’s just not enough,’ she says.

We Belong's success is a cause for celebration, but not complacency. It intends to keep up the momentum, as its immediate focus shifts to implementation of the policy change, to ensure as many young migrants benefit as quickly as possible. It will continue to create young leaders, and to be a much-needed, authentic voice in public debate about the damage to young lives caused by the immigration system. It will continue to highlight how for the five-year period when young migrants have LLR, the tentacles of the hostile environment will continue to reach in every aspect of their lives. As Chrisann wrote in November 2021, young migrants will still be at the mercy of 'the professionals and institutions who have been co-opted to enforce the hostile environment'; and these gatekeepers will continue to misunderstand and be suspicious of LLR. 'Until this changes, young migrants will remain at risk of unfairness and discrimination and we will still be made to feel like outsiders.'

*April 2022*

## 2. Campaign history: **We Belong's campaign tactics and why they succeeded**

'Hellascary is the first word I would use,' says Dami Makinde describing how it felt to become co-CEO of We Belong in 2019.

For everyone involved - staff, members and funders - the creation of We Belong was a leap of faith.

Dami says: 'We didn't have any experience in leading an organisation, or governance, or fundraising. There was that feeling in the pit of my stomach, if this all goes wrong, this is going to be horrendous.'

Although it was a ground-breaking organisation, We Belong already had a strong team of supporters, and clear vision of how it wanted to operate, developed from its time as the Let us Learn campaign.

Ijeoma recalls feeling 'in awe'. 'Talking about status, talking about university. It's not something small. So the fact it was all migrant-led, with people with expertise helping, was just amazing to me.'

Dami sums up the new organisation's ethos: 'It was young people at the centre of what they wanted to do. It was finding young people's voice, being heard, and taking control over the future.'

The drive, authenticity and plausibility that its lived-experience activists brought were to become We Belong's defining characteristic - and to prove fundamental to its success as a campaigning force.

Along with lived-experience leadership, there are other key ingredients in the We Belong mix, including centring those with experience of the immigration system, telling young migrants' stories, direct work, community building, creating young leaders, and integrated communications.

All of these elements are intertwined and complementary. It's not possible to separate out storytelling, which We Belong does to such great effect, from its direct work supporting young migrants; its direct work and core group meetings fuel and shape its campaign decisions and keep its ear to the ground; the core group and regular gatherings create an environment where people can share their stories, which helps young migrants feel less stigmatised, and more supported to deal with setbacks, both personal and campaign-wide. Through these experiences, young migrants become powerful communicators, whose voices then feed into We Belong's strategic comms, research reports, litigation witness statements, and so on.

### **i) Building the organisation and campaign around lived experience**

The phrase 'lived experience' can be a useful shorthand for funders and campaigning organisations, alike, but its meaning is often quite fuzzy.

In one We Belong member's experience it can be: 'A white person being the face and bringing a young person with them and saying: "Talk, talk, this is our case study!"'<sup>6</sup>

Anyone who works in the social justice sector will have seen examples like this: of young people put forward to 'tell their story' in order to, say, attract media attention or funding, for a campaign where all the key decisions are taken by others.

We Belong turns that model on its head. As a young-migrant-led organisation, every key decision at every stage, is made by those with lived experience (who can tell their own stories, if they so wish); and who can bring in external expertise (say, comms or public affairs support), when they decide it would be useful.

6 <https://justforkidslaw.org/sites/default/files/upload/It%27s%20Our%20Time%20-%20Process%20Evaluation%20for%20We%20Belong.pdf>

Tashi says We Belong's approach is more impactful on the audience and empowering for the young person. 'Some organisations have a lived experience person who tells their story and policy people to explain the issue. The fact that our young people were knowledgeable enough to do both was very impressive. Even if we hadn't gotten the win, I think by doing it that way, you really do empower the young person and help them take charge of their own life.'

Her experience at We Belong leads Chrisann to differentiate between advocacy and campaigning. While campaigning can be inclusive, offering multiple ways for young migrants to get involved to whatever extent they are comfortable with, advocacy is about putting yourself forward as both the face of an issue and a spokesperson for yourself and the wider group. This kind of advocacy often places great demands on a young person, particularly if it seems to fall on deaf ears. As Tosin says: 'It is really draining to talk about yourself and not get any reaction. Or, "We've heard you. It's a no." ' Advocacy is not for everyone, and requires resources and support to be done ethically and well.

We Belong's success is based on building both campaigning and advocacy into its work, playing to the strengths of both. Chrisann says: 'This is a really key thing about empowerment and participation. You choose how you want to be empowered, and how you want to participate.'

Whereas advocacy has to be tightly focused on the issue, Zino Akaka says We Belong campaign gatherings can be sprawling affairs. They are 'rarely ever about us being migrants'. 'We'd bond over it. Laugh about it. Be angry about it. But it was more about the relationships that we had with each other, our cultural differences and some similarities. Very much like people being people.'

Discovering you are part of a wider community, can be a source of support and strength. Tosin believed his situation was unique, until he attended a Let us Learn meeting and saw two people from his school. 'I thought they were British, and they're like, oh we thought you were British.' In his case, it gave Tosin the confidence

and desire to share his own story to advocate for change.

Some stories are easier for young migrants to tell than others. Let us Learn's Young, Gifted and Blocked campaign for university scholarships was founded on having a large group of young people willing to speak about their university ambitions. In its most recent campaign over LLR, We Belong found far fewer members were willing to take on advocacy roles. Chrisann says: 'There were probably about six of us that felt comfortable talking about this. Young people were fine asking for student finance. They weren't fine with us speaking about their immigration status.'

Working closely with the wider campaign group is a source of strength and clarity, for Chrisann and her colleagues, but it has also meant having to face their scepticism about whether anything will change. With the most recent campaign: 'There wasn't a lot of shared energy, or hope among the team that we're going to get this done.'

We Belong's commitment to amplifying the voices of young migrants shapes all aspects of its work. For example, instead of putting in a written response to the Law Commission's consultation on simplifying the Immigration Rules, it organised a focus group.

Marianne Lagrue, policy manager in the Migrant Children's Project at CCLC, who attended We Belong's meeting with two Law Commission lawyers. She says: 'There was this wall of articulacy and passion and insight coming at them. One was furiously making notes. The other one asking questions and just really engaging. That was so powerful in the consultation write up. The Law Commission is an organisation with a very technical focus but you can really read into that that they were impressed and moved by this direct engagement, which they weren't expecting to get.'

She adds: 'The fact that We Belong are already so mobilised and so ready to speak about these things, because they had the vocabulary and they'd worked so hard to build a community that could talk, was so powerful.'

Her CCLC colleague, Anita Hurrell, says: 'They bring the voice of people with lived experience but they also bring the kind of leadership skills and policy nous that not everybody has. They are as individuals remarkable leaders.'

One of those Anita identifies as a 'remarkable leader' is Tashi, who joined as We Belong parliamentary officer in March 2020. Tashi has a maths degree and was previously working in fashion. When she saw the parliamentary officer job advertised, she didn't apply straightaway. 'I looked at the post and thought: I wish I had the experience or the insight to be able to do that.'

Tashi had no background of working in public affairs, but did have first hand experience of the 10-year LLR path and the harshness of the immigration system, which at times threatened to leave her and her mum homeless. 'I had experience of engaging with people in power to make life a bit easier and solving immigration issues that way,' she says.

Chrisann believes it was Tashi's experience of living with LLR which made her so effective in her post. That was worth more than any amount of detailed parliamentary knowledge, which she was confident Tashi could acquire on the job, with external support.

Outreach officer Kimberly Garande is the first port of call for many of the young migrants who contact We Belong. Like Tashi, Kimberly brings her own experiences of LLR to her work; sometimes, she will share her own story with them, as a way of giving hope or showing empathy to someone who is reeling after just learning about the impact of LLR on their lives (she did this to powerful effect with Maheraj Lian, see below.)

Kimberly's work can become emotionally overwhelming, not least because so many of the stories mirror her own difficulties. When that happens, an advantage of being in an organisation run by other young migrants is that We Belong colleagues instinctively know how to support her 'because that's the kind of support they would need if they were in this role.' Kimberly says: 'I'm not having to explain

anything from scratch. Chrisann knows. She understands, and she empathises.'

The toughest time for Kimberly is waiting for her own LLR renewal when she gets 'a big pain in my chest'. 'My whole body just knows that this is a time of panic.' However, rather than taking timeout during this period, she finds throwing herself into work therapeutic. 'When your head is in your own case, you don't feel that sense of control. When I'm supporting somebody else, I can be their anchor and support them. So it's hard to be an anchor for myself, but it's a lot easier to be one for somebody else.'

## ii) Clear, consistent, and authentic messaging

We Belong's primary campaign ask has changed over the years (access to university; then, reform to the LLR process), but the tone and content of its messaging has remained constant.

All along, We Belong has spoken about how the talent and ambition of young migrants is going to waste, whether because they are blocked from accessing university, or weighed down by the uncertainty and cost of the 10-year LLR path. The focus has been on the great potential of the group affected, rather than the scale of the injustice they were facing.

Tashi, who joined the staff in 2020, says the messaging 'was always about being aspirational, and being able to take care of yourself. I don't think I came in and changed that at all. That was something that We Belong had from the start. What changed was just who we targeted.'

Staying on positive message is not always easy for a young migrant telling their story to someone whose government has the power to rectify the situation - and is also responsible for creating it in the first place.

Tosin Lawal says the preparation he had with We Belong colleagues before meeting Immigration Minister Kevin Foster was essential, to ensure he told his story clearly and compellingly - and focused on the elements which would be most likely to strike a chord.

Tosin says there are times when there is a mismatch between what he knows is the wisest thing to say, and what he is thinking: 'In my head, I'm like - "I just want to say, this is really hard! We've been through a lot, you know! What the hell?"'

Ijeoma has been active in the We Belong campaign since the outset, doing multiple media interviews over many years. She says of We Belong's emphasis on positive messaging: 'Funnily enough, it doesn't bother me because I realise there's an end goal to this.' She likens advocacy for change to an exam: to get the outcome you want, you have to give the examiner what they want. Ijeoma adds: 'I don't think I've ever felt constrained, and I definitely do think there are times when we need to just be very real and honest about our feelings. But I understand it's all political, and we have to be very careful with the balance.'

We Belong's messaging has endured partly because it has proved to be effective (it secured the creation of more than 20 new university scholarships; Tim Loughton MP described We Belong as 'articulate and impressive'; Caroline Nokes MP as 'grafters'), but also - crucially - because it is authentic, and genuinely reflects the origins and outlook of the group.

Tashi says: 'It was never a pity thing. Pretty much every meeting we had with an MP, they remarked on how much we'd achieved despite the circumstances we were in and how they were proud to be able to support us.'

Sarah Lambert says another factor in We Belong's success was it had boiled the campaign down to a simple, doable, ask - which is she says is often harder than it looks for campaigners to achieve. 'When you see the end product of a campaign, it looks like it's really straightforward. It's obvious that would be the thing you're asking for. But it can take a long time to get to that very simple ask: *this is what we want.*'

### iii) Parliamentary strategy

We Belong embarked on a new strategy with the arrival of Tashi Tahir as parliamentary officer in 2020. For Dami the shift in campaign focus was

'about understanding the times that we are in'; and 'understanding who we could place around us to achieve that goal'.

With a large Conservative majority, We Belong knew that to bring about change through legislation, the support of Labour MPs would not be enough; its campaign would also have to appeal to Conservative MPs. As most members of We Belong lived in Labour constituencies, it would need to find other ways of connecting with MPs who could take up the cause.

With the support of public affairs consultants, We Belong identified a number of MPs as 'targets', whose backgrounds suggested they might be interested in the issue, and who would have the clout to put it on the political agenda. These included Conservative MPs Tim Loughton and Laura Farris, both of whom spoke at its parliamentary event in September 2020. Tim Loughton - a former children's minister who had previously laid down parliamentary questions about child refugees - would go on to play a pivotal role in the campaign.

Former immigration minister Caroline Nokes MP was also on We Belong's list. The group had had a brief meeting with her when she was still in office, which had proved dispiriting and unproductive. When it contacted her again, however, it discovered its campaigning had clearly made an impression - something it had not realised at the time. Now she was no longer a minister, Caroline Nokes expressed support, and was willing to help, by sharing information with her parliamentary colleagues and giving advice.

Refugee, Asylum and Migration Policy (RAMP) director, Laura Taylor who later worked with We Belong to help further hone its appeal to Conservative values says: 'Even at that stage, they had a message and a resonance that got through to Tory MPs.'

A Labour MP identified by We Belong as widely respected and influential was Meg Hillier, then chair of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC). Chrisann was a constituent and had met Meg Hillier when the MP gave a talk at her sixth form about women's empowerment. Meg Hillier

responded to Chrisann's letter with a phone call, and a raft of suggestions and advice - and since then has repeatedly mentioned We Belong and the issue of LLR in parliament and to the PAC.

Chrisann says the level of interest Meg Hillier took in the group and the fact its members were willing to be identified made these interventions powerful and served to raise We Belong's profile among other MPs. 'It felt like she knew me. She saw us. It wasn't just a collection of young people. And that made it more personalised. She was really invested. We gave our consent for her to use our names and she ran with it.'

Given We Belong's scant resources and the importance of the issue to its cohort, it was careful to focus its efforts on parliamentary relationships which were likely to bear fruit. Where they were, it put time and care into nurturing those relationships. After the parliamentary event, Tashi sent Laura Farris and Tim Loughton watercolours that she had painted of landmarks in their constituencies. This was partly as a smart tactic, but also a genuine gesture of how much We Belong appreciated their time and support. Unfortunately, We Belong's contacts with peers were not as productive as it might have hoped. Despite its best efforts, rather than engaging with the issue: 'At every meeting we had with a lord, they would just take us down memory lane,' recalls Chrisann.

#### **iv) Collaboration - building genuine relationships**

We Belong's approach has been a mixture of collaboration with like-minded organisations and individuals; and plotting its own singular path that reflects the particular interests of the young migrants it represents.

Its relationship with CCLC has been particularly constructive and close. Chrisann says: 'They have always treated us as equals.' The two organisations see themselves as having different but complementary skills, and crucially share a willingness to support incremental change. As Anita Hurrell says: 'What's been won here is progress for a group of people on the 10-year route, and not for everybody.'

Anita adds CCLC would always defer to We Belong on any issue to do with campaigning, whereas what CCLC brings is technical and legal expertise. Anita says: 'Their work is the most important. We see our role to be helpful in the background.' For example, in her role as chair of the Migrant Children's Consortium, Anita has been able to share information and try to ensure We Belong are invited to key meetings.

Her colleague Marianne Lagrue gives an instance of how the two organisations can work closely, but still play to their individual strengths. When the Home Office published the draft concession, she and Tashi went through the wording line by line together. They then went away to write up their own organisation's responses. Marianne says: 'Their response would have been weakened by too much legal input, because it was them approaching publication of the concession in a very We Belong way.'

Marianne adds: 'There is something very disarming about We Belong's approach. It's so un-adversarial, but they also speak with a lot of passion, and there's a real integrity and honesty to it.'

The collaboration with CCLC worked well because the two organisations built a genuine relationship, and each had different but interrelated roles. Other attempts at making common cause were less successful, including joining forces over children's citizenship fees, where there were significant differences in campaign aims, the cohorts represented, and in organisations' style and approach.

By creating its own path and focusing on its specific campaign aims, We Belong was also able to extend its collaborative approach to Home Office officials. The relationships it was able to build were to prove decisive in the campaign. At a time when progress seemed to have stalled, a supportive civil servant was able to get things moving again, and was also a source of contacts and advice.

Tashi says: They were really helpful in letting us understand how the Home Office operated, who was head of what, and where we needed to target our campaigning. We were an organisation

which hadn't really experienced how such a big bureaucratic organisation works.'

## v) External expertise and knowing when to bring it in

Chrisann says at the start of We Belong's most recent campaign, she recognised two things: 'That the change we seek is through parliament'; and: 'We didn't know anything about the internal workings of parliament.'

To make progress, the team would need to bring in public affairs expertise.

Earlier in its history, Let us Learn (as it was then) had had the support of Aidan Rylatt from Principle Consulting, and he was their first port of call to provide support and training to We Belong's newly appointed parliamentary officer.

Dami Makinde says right from the outset, We Belong had known it wouldn't achieve its aims singlehandedly, and always been encouraged by funders to seek extra help, when needed. She says: 'Humility plays a massive part. There's never any shame in seeking help. We understood we don't have all the expertise, so we have to take advice from other people if we want to be successful.'

As the parliamentary campaign progressed and We Belong came closer to achieving its goal, it felt it needed additional, more specialised consultancy support, this time from RAMP, to help with further tailoring its messaging to appeal to Conservative MPs; and from Sarah Lambert, for advice on how to table an amendment to the Nationality and Borders Bill; and from CCLC on how to make the amendment wording inclusive of all young people.

## vi) Integrated comms

Chrisann explains that We Belong's approach of integrating comms into all its work arose from her own experience as a young migrant telling her story to journalists.

Despite having had media training, Chrisann still found it 'very difficult to articulate my hardships in a way that did not make me feel so overwhelmed and drained at the end of it.'

What she wanted for herself, her colleagues and members of We Belong, was to be able to 'curate our stories', so that they could tell them, while still feeling comfortable and in control.

The importance of young migrants exploring and sharing their stories is now fundamental to everything that We Belong does.

Chrisann says: 'That, to me, is the beauty of integrating comms from the start. You are dealing with young people who have trauma that, for the first time during the campaign, has been revealed to them. It was part of our narrative building, which was so important. It was therapeutic. It allowed us to be vulnerable with each other as a group, and build trust.'

The power and authenticity of its work, whether talking to politicians or funders, generating media coverage, publishing research, or creating campaign videos, all stems from the 'strong cohort and community of young people' that We Belong has created.

For Ijeoma, the We Belong gatherings were the ideal training ground for finding her voice. In Ijeoma's case, it gave her the courage to tell her story to a live audience of thousands at the 2016 London Mayoral Hustings. She says: 'I think that grassroots thing of being able to tell your story just within the group was so fantastic. And it helped a lot of people. It helps you build your own confidence. And then when someone says, "Do you want to do this media interview?" You're like, yes, I do. Because I have all the confidence in the world that I can do it now.'

Zino says telling her story was 'liberating'. 'This is something that I've needed that I didn't realise.' It helped her see her immigration situation as just 'an experience'; 'and there's no need for me to be scared of an experience'. By starting out telling her story to the group meant 'being able to identify what my boundaries are'.

Ijeoma says: 'If you're looking from the outside, you're thinking, why are they just sitting around telling their story? But your story is such a powerful tool. It's what helps politicians, and the media understand and recognise and see us as real people.'



This is an aspect which rankles with Zino, that, to an MP: 'You're only valuable to them, if you have a dramatic story to tell, that they can share in parliament or on their Twitter.' She adds: 'Your [MP's] job isn't to listen to stories; your role is to fix problems.'

Zino, Tosin and Ijeoma all cut their story-telling teeth during We Belong gatherings, and over a prolonged period of time. An exception to We Belong's usual approach of gradually immersing young migrants in its campaigns and advocacy was Maheraj Lian, who first contacted the organisation in 2021. A matter of weeks later, and never previously having met anyone from the organisation face-to-face (because of lockdown), Maheraj was being filmed for the BBC Panorama documentary 'Am I British?'

The BBC programme was an opportunity for We Belong to reach a wider audience than ever before, and, we hoped, to further ramp up the pressure on government to bring about change. We knew it would demand substantial time and resources, from the organisation itself and the individuals interviewed - with no guarantee of what the outcome of We Belong's involvement would be.

Maheraj agreed to be filmed at his family home in east London, with his parents and siblings, and to do a sit-down interview with a BBC journalist. Ijeoma and Chrisann would also feature in the programme.

Despite being so new to We Belong, Maheraj says the conversation he had with outreach officer, Kimberly, when he initially made contact, had helped him get around his 'mental wall', and gave him confidence to talk about his situation for the first time. He says: 'Up until that point, I'd never told anyone my story. I always felt quite timid about speaking on that point in my life.'

After speaking to Kimberly and hearing her own story, his mindset changed: 'Maybe it's time for me to actually tell people that I've got this other side of me, and I've gone through this hardship.'

Maheraj, who goes to Eton College on a scholarship, found the response from his friends was one of surprise, but universally supportive.

'They were all really empathetic, and wanted to help. So, I thought it would be fine for me to do the programme, because clearly there are people out there who do want to help.'

Any media interviews can be demanding, requiring careful preparation. Panorama would be particularly intrusive: filming in the interviewees' homes, including of other family members, an almost forensic-level of fact-checking that, at times, was uncomfortably reminiscent of the Home Office: for example, was Ijeoma 2, or was she 3, when she first came to the UK?

Both Ijeoma and Maheraj say having We Belong involved at every stage of the process, including being present at the interviews, was vital for them.

Maheraj says without support, he would have 'just felt a bit sick' when he saw the list of questions the BBC wanted to ask on camera. Questions that were entirely reasonable for the BBC (and its viewers) to ask, were all but impossible for those who were young children at the time the events happened, to answer - such as (the old chestnut): why wasn't your immigration status sorted out sooner? Maheraj says: 'I honestly don't know why. A lot of it was just really shoddy legal work. The solicitors my parents had before were awful.'

## vii) Pragmatism and incrementalism

As a young organisation, run by young migrants, it was natural for We Belong to focus on the future changes they wanted to see, to relieve their current situations, rather than harking back to pre-2012 days, before the 10-year route was introduced in the first place.

Tashi says: 'Most organisations in this space have been campaigning for a long time. They were used to a certain policy, and then the policy became too draconian. They want to go back to a time when it seemed more reasonable.'

We Belong's relatively short memory gave it an ability to start from here, and engage pragmatically with politicians. Tashi says: 'It's relatively easy to make a new law. It's not very easy to retrospectively pull it back.'

At one stage, We Belong set its sights on the Immigration Health Surcharge, which is a particular source of grievance for young migrants. The IHS now adds £1,560 to each LLR application and, for those whose families have contributed to the NHS through tax and NI for decades, it feels grossly unfair. Despite the intellectual and factual case that can be made against the IHS for this cohort, We Belong recognised that there would be no political case for a reform which would be seen as reducing NHS funding during a pandemic. It took the pragmatic decision to shift its campaign focus, accordingly.

The accountability We Belong feels towards its community of young migrants whose lives are daily blighted by LLR, was also a strong driving factor in favour of pragmatism. Its aim was to mount a winnable campaign, rather than, say, put its resources into calling for the complete transformation of the immigration system - however much it might agree that systemic reform is needed.

Tashi says We Belong did not take position on whether the 10-year route is 'completely wrong and should be abolished for everyone'. Instead, it took the line that LLR 'was not meant to be put in place for our specific cohort and that we were facing the unintended consequences'.

The messaging of 'unintended consequences', or the impact on the We Belong cohort being 'an anomaly', made it much easier for Conservative MPs and ministers to sign up to the campaign. 'It meant that the current Conservative government could do something about it without saying that the previous Conservative government had got it wrong,' says Tashi.

If We Belong had spent time arguing that the government did know, or should have known, the terrible toll its policy was taking, its campaign would likely have run into the sand. Instead, it focused on building bridges and finding common ground, which would get it closer to its goal of improving the lives of the young migrants it represents.

Chrisann believes too many organisations use meetings with Home Office officials to bombard

them with criticism, rather offer solutions for how problems could be solved.

Chrisann recalls thinking on one such occasion: 'This is why it's gone so horribly wrong. That's why, when organisations meet officials next time, they don't have any actions because you didn't actually give them any actions. You just told them what was wrong. You just made them feel terrible and, you know, cross.'

Throughout, Chrisann has tried to employ a tactic she remembers being told at a campaign bootcamp: You can't ask something of someone you do not have a relationship with. You have to be 'useful' to the person you are trying persuade. You have your ask, but how can you be helpful to them and meet an immediate need of theirs?

Tim Loughton MP has been invaluable to We Belong's success. He has taken up their cause, and devoted considerable time, and energy to supporting it. He says: 'I thought their campaigning was really good. They weren't alarmist. They were calm and articulate and they put up good people. They made their case in a very impressive way. I think if they'd tried to bang a drum or name and shame, it would not have been nearly as effective, as "look, we've got a problem. Can you help us? We can really contribute. Here are the facts." They went about it absolutely the right way.'

Tim Loughton speaks about the organisation and its team with genuine respect and admiration. No doubt there are multiple issues on which his views and those of many members of We Belong would diverge. However, on this one particular issue, he and We Belong made common cause, and worked together to bring about a change which will transform the lives of thousands of young migrants who have made the UK their home.

### **viii) Dealing with setbacks; taking the 'wins', however small**

Each member of We Belong I spoke to for this report recalls a moment in the campaign when they thought it was pointless; that they would never bring about the change they were so personally invested in seeing.

For Chrisann, it was the House of Commons committee vote in 2019 to increase to the Immigration Health Surcharge. As he was leaving, we stopped a backbench MP who had just spoken in the debate declaring the charge was justified, as it is the 'National Health Service, not the *International* Health Service'. Chrisann attempted to explain the impact of the spiralling charge on her, and others who are no one's idea of a 'health tourist'.

The backbencher's response was uncomprehending: 'Can't you just pay it out of your salary?'

Chrisann says: 'That made me feel really hopeless. I'm just thinking, this is the attitude that we're up against. We're never going to get any of this changed. I think that was a dark moment.'

Ultimately, however, the encounter and feeling 'we weren't getting anywhere' was the spur for We Belong to change its campaign tactics to focus on the length of the LLR route.

Sometimes, an event which felt like a failure at the time, can turn out, longer term, to have been a prelude to success.

It took We Belong a year of social media and other pressure - including its upbeat #CuppaWithCaroline campaign - before the then Immigration Minister Caroline Nokes made good on an earlier commitment to meet them. When the long-awaited, hard-won meeting arrived, it was a big moment for the We Belong team. They sent the minister a detailed briefing about their concerns in advance, and prepared carefully what they wanted to say. They also brought flowers and homemade cake. The reception was not as warm as they had hoped. There was no tea offered, and the cake was handed immediately to an aide. Worse, the minister had not read their briefing and thought they were there to talk about citizenship fees.

Dami says that was when she 'felt defeated'. 'It was a difficult moment. It was the first time we got a Conservative to sit down with us - and it was the immigration minister, and it just didn't go the way we expected it to.' Zino,

who also attended, was equally despondent. She describes her feelings as 'just normal disappointment at politics'.

Despite giving We Belong a chilly welcome when she was in post, after leaving office Caroline Nokes has been an ally, and helped towards the campaign's success.

As We Belong discovered, campaigning takes time and can be dispiriting and exhausting. Often, it is an act of faith. Any positive change, however small, should be acknowledged and celebrated. We Belong has no way of knowing if its #FreezeOurFees campaign played any part in the fact Home Office fees have been frozen since 2019, but that shouldn't stop the group chalking it up as a modest success and an incentive to keep going.

Campaigning often entails finding the motivation to keep on going, in ways that are true to your aims and values, without knowing at the time if anyone is hearing you. This is an area where We Belong's links with the community it has created really come into play, providing a forum for those leading the charge to commiserate with others, regroup, and reenergise, and plan for the next stage.

Even the meeting in 2021 with Kevin Foster - which came just a few weeks before the change was announced - felt like a failure at the time. We Belong members describe the minister variously as 'having a good poker face' and 'very standoffish'. Tosin, who was there specifically to tell his story, says: 'When we had a debrief afterwards, I was like, "I got nothing. I think I messed up." I felt like I was asking, please do this. This is what we want. And he was like, "yeah, I'll get back to you."'

Tashi's recollection is similar. 'We did not think that meeting was a success. We didn't feel listened to.' However, having worked so hard to meet the minister, Tashi was determined to try to salvage something from it. When Kevin Foster said that the Home Office had little information about why young people end up on the 10 year route, Tashi offered We Belong's help to find out. 'I said we have the capacity to look into gathering further information and we will

produce a report so he can get a better overview of the system.'

We Belong canvassed 40 young migrants and speedily produced a report setting out the different ways they had arrived on the LLR path, which it was then asked to present to a group of senior Home Office officials.

It was a perfect example of what Chrisann describes (above) as making yourself 'useful' to the person you are trying to persuade.

The mood at the next Home Office meeting was much more positive. One official assured We Belong it was his 'number one priority to make sure that it was fixed for us'. 'They all said, you've told us this so many times already and this is just cementing what we already know, and we just need to go and do something about it now.'

## 3. Role of litigation

The Let us Learn campaign was rooted in litigation: one of the first things the group did was to act as an intervenor in the 2015 Supreme Court case of Tigere. The success of Tigere showed Let us Learn not just the power of litigation, but also its limitations. The ruling meant some young people with LLR were now eligible for student loans<sup>7</sup> - but not all. To maximise the number of young migrants able to go to university, other campaign tools were needed, which led to the the Young, Gifted and Blocked campaign, urging universities to create scholarships.

Islington Law Centre (ILC) has had strong ties with Let us Learn since its earliest days, with both organisations referring young people back and forth. Its immigration solicitors, including Roopa Tanna and Anna Skehan, have seen first hand the damaging effect of LLR on their clients - driving individuals and families into poverty and debt, as they tried to keep up with the repeated renewals. Like We Belong, they were determined to challenge the policy and make the case for reform.

ILC began exploring possible grounds for a legal challenge, conducting extensive research into LLR's impact on children and young people (including interviews with Let us Learn members), and marshalling its specialist legal team.

We Belong was keen to support the case, but was concerned not to jeopardise its still-embryonic contacts with the Home Office and support from Conservative MPs. After extensive discussions with its board and ILC, We Belong agreed the best course was to provide witness statements, rather than acting as intervenor (as they had in Tigere), or being a party to the litigation. Two witness statements were completed during 2021, both written by then co-CEO Dami Makinde. Dami's statements described the impact of LLR on her own life (including needing Home Office permission to

get married; and limiting her mortgage provider options), plus detailed case studies of LLR's impact on the finances, employment and educational prospects, and mental health, of six of the young people We Belong is working with.

Roopa says: 'Our collaborative working around the witness statement was really good. It was some of our best evidence.'

Producing such detailed witness statements to a tight timescale was no small feat for We Belong, and needed significant resources from the organisation. Its willingness to do so is testimony not just to the importance of the issue to its members, but also to its strong and long-standing relationship of trust with ILC collectively and Roopa and Anna individually.

It was coincidence that the long-planned, carefully plotted, legal challenge came to a head just as the We Belong campaign began to bear fruit in the form of regular discussions with senior Home Office officials - but the timing proved to be fortuitous.

Roopa believes the fact We Belong had credibility with civil servants gave its witness statements particular weight. 'It was really strong evidence from very powerful voices that the Home Office were now listening to as well,' says Roopa.

It was also, everyone agrees, fortunate We Belong's involvement was restricted to witness statements, which kept it at arm's length from the adversarial process. We Belong was open with the Home Office about having provided evidence in support of the litigation, and its conversations with the Home Office continued, as before. Tashi Tahir recalls that at one point, a senior civil servant even thanked We Belong for 'not taking the Home Office to court' and instead 'going through the parliamentary democratic process of achieving this'.

7 Provided they had held it for at least three years, and lived in the UK for half their life.

Anna describes ILC and We Belong as 'going along at the same time on the same road, but not in the same car'.

Roopa says: 'Because we weren't tied to each other, it meant that the campaigning and advocacy could continue unimpeded. The last thing the Home Office would have wanted was lawyers involved, coming into meetings. They would have shut it down.'

In this instance, because the lawyers and campaigners were travelling separately (albeit very much in the same direction), it meant benefitting from the strengths of both. Lawyers' instincts are to be cautious; whereas campaigning can demand leaps of faith, as We Belong was finding in its Home Office dealings.

Although it was We Belong's ability to steer its own path which led to the concession being achieved, both Roopa and Anna believe that there could have been more of a role for lawyers once the destination was in sight, during discussions over the implementation mechanism.

Anna says: 'With hindsight, that would have been a useful moment for us to have a discussion about the technical points.'

# 4. Impact of Windrush Scandal

Chrisann Jarrett recalls the stunned reaction of We Belong members to the 2018 Windrush scandal.

‘We had to take a breather at one of our gatherings. There was shock that this was happening to people who looked like us. And for me, personally, being born in Jamaica. It was, Oh my god. I could be sent back as a granny to a country that I don’t see as home.’

A few days before the scandal broke fully in the UK media, Radio 4’s Today programme had told me that Let us Learn’s protest outside Downing Street and its campaign against spiralling Home Office fees was ‘not a story for them’<sup>8</sup>. Once Windrush was dominating the news agenda, Today’s editors had an abrupt change of heart. They - along with many other media outlets - were suddenly keen to hear from long-term migrants, young as well as old, about their harsh treatment at the hands of the Home Office.

Over the next few days, Chrisann, Dami and other members of Let us Learn, probably did more media interviews than they had done in the previous four years - including for the Today programme, Money Box, Daily Mirror, BBC Radio 1, Guardian, and Huffington Post.

The unprecedented media attention inevitably took its toll but, four years on, Dami has no regrets about taking every media opportunity they were offered. For her, it was a way of showing solidarity with the Windrush victims, more than pressing We Belong’s case. ‘It was very difficult, but overall I’m glad we spoke out. It was about saying, you are not alone. You have people like us backing you, and we want everyone to know, so that it can change.’

The Windrush scandal felt like such a seismic moment. Understandably, some organisations and funders in the immigration sector hoped the revelations would lead to a re-set in political

attitudes towards migrants, more generally, and that the moment could be seized to press for systemic reform.

The lesson that Chrisann took from the fallout was the opposite. At the time, she was on secondment at the Greater London Authority, and led on its response to Wendy Williams’ Windrush Review. Despite the magnitude of the harm caused and injustices exposed, rather than introducing sweeping changes to the Home Office, the government’s response to Windrush ‘was very specific and measured’.

Chrisann adds: ‘For me, that meant they were never going to change the whole system. They were only going to change things for the people that they were forced to change it for. So, it was about repositioning We Belong as a group of young people that they should be forced to change it for.’

Like many others, We Belong did initially attempt to draw parallels between young migrants who had grown up in the UK thinking they were British, and the Windrush victims. While these comparisons may have been reasonable, within the organisation there was unease about this tactic. First, with multiple voices warning of ‘the next Windrush’, in a crowded field, We Belong’s messages weren’t landing; and there were reservations about taking away attention that should stay focused on the Windrush victims, many of whom were still suffering extreme hardship.

The Windrush scandal did, however, play a significant role in the success of the We Belong campaign, but not as immediately or dramatically, as might have been expected. As Aidan Rylatt from Principle Consulting says: ‘Most of the work happened when Windrush was no longer dominating headlines.’

8 I had contacted the BBC in my capacity as comms consultant to Let us Learn/Just for Kids Law.

What Windrush did was create a small opening, which was just enough for We Belong, using its incremental and collaborative approach, to hook on to and expand.

One of the Williams' recommendations taken up by the Home Office was creation of an 'early warning hub' within the department to nip potential future scandals in the bud. It was a place where staff could flag their concerns if they thought an injustice was brewing, without going through the usual line management processes. Laura Taylor, RAMP director, likens it to 'internal whistleblowing'.

Laura heard informally from an official working closely with that team that one of the issues flagged had been the impact of the 10-year route on children and young people. She suspects that, when the hub began looking into the issue, We Belong's existing reputation within the Home Office as 'sensible and pragmatic' would have stood them in good stead, making it more likely the team would seek to find ways to work with them to deal with their concerns.

In another happy coincidence, just as the early warning hub were asking questions about LLR, so were the Home Office press office, following an approach from the BBC's Panorama team, who were working on the 'Am I British?' documentary.

Laura says: 'It seems as if the media team and the early warning hub both had alarm bells going at the same time.' This resulted in an unlikely pincer movement, not just increasing the pressure on the Home Office to address We Belong's concerns, but also arguably giving the Home Office the chance to show a tangible example of how the measures put in place following Windrush had led to change in practice.

Sarah Lambert adds that, while Windrush may have increased the chances of a sympathetic hearing, not all the political tides were running in We Belong's favour. 'Equally, they could have been held back by some of the negative conversations going on around immigration,' she says.

We Belong are, she says, 'one of the only migration-related organisations progressing their long-term aims to improve the situation for migrants at the moment.' She adds: 'I've been so impressed with them.'



# 5. Reflections

These are our brief reflections based on We Belong's experience of being a successful, youth-led campaigning organisation. They are in no particular order and not intended to be prescriptive: the key lesson from We Belong's experience is that every organisation needs to find its own distinctive voice and path. As Chrisann Jarrett says: 'There was a lot of relationship building. There was a lot of trial and error and failure. But we just kept going because we genuinely believed in what we were doing and that it would work.'

## **i) Campaign wins are hard.**

They take time, resources, careful planning, flexibility, the right kind of allies, resilience - and luck.

There were so many stars that had to align to secure We Belong's success. Some things are within an organisation's control; others won't be. How you respond to the ones that aren't may make a significant difference to whether or not you are ultimately successful.

## **ii) Support from funders can be decisive to a campaign outcome.**

We Belong always felt able to call on its funders, to cover external consultancy and support at key stages, for introductions to their contacts and networks, and to share concerns and setbacks. This kind of frank and open communication played a key role in its success.

## **iii) Along with lived-experience leadership, key ingredients in the We Belong mix include: telling young migrants' stories, direct work, community building, and integrated communications.**

These elements are intertwined. It's not possible to separate out storytelling from We Belong's direct work; its direct work and group meetings fuel and shape its campaign decisions; these gatherings create opportunities for sharing stories, which builds confidence and community.

Through these experiences, young migrants become powerful communicators, whose voices then feed into all elements of We Belong's work.

## **iv) Too much 'collaboration' can hold everyone back.**

Collaboration is only possible where there is genuine common purpose, respect (and ideally, liking) between organisations and individuals, which have complementary skills and a similar outlook. Without those elements, 'collaboration' may just mean diluted messages, and organisations losing the clear sense of purpose that previously drove them.

## **v) It is not realistic to ask another organisation to add your list of campaign aims to its discussions with the Home Office or other decision-maker. That is not how campaigning works.**

We Belong's won a seat at the table with the Home Office by establishing its credentials as the absolute experts on the impact of limited leave to remain on the cohort of young migrants it was created to represent. It would not be credible for it to suddenly add a raft of changes that would affect different groups.

## **vi) If your organisation wants legislative change, you will have to engage with the government of the day.**

You may not find it easy or palatable, but to have a chance of success, you will need to match your agenda as closely as possible to the government's, and find influential allies who will support you.

## **vii) If the only realistic option is incremental change, those directly affected would rather have a small win than be stuck with the status quo, or hold out for widespread systemic change that may never come.**

Chrisann explains it this way: young migrants with LLR are so used to being told 'no', that when they get into a room with someone with power

to make changes, they are determined to do everything they can to get at least some kind of yes.

**iix) The wellbeing of lived-experience activists should trump all campaign considerations. Holistic support must be provided and funded.**

Support and safeguards are essential when working with young people who are directly affected by an issue, whether as employees or volunteers. It takes a lot of time, care, and preparation before a young person can tell their story in a way that is safe for them, and not re-traumatising. Often, they will have other, more pressing needs to be dealt with first. Chrisann says: 'I can't tell someone who is homeless to get involved in campaigning.' Not everyone affected by an issue wants to talk about it publicly.

**ix) Youth-led groups are not there to serve other organisations.**

It is not the job of youth-led groups, and they will not always have the resources, to fill the lived-experience gaps of other organisations, or provide interviewees for media coverage for someone else's project or work.

# We Belong publications

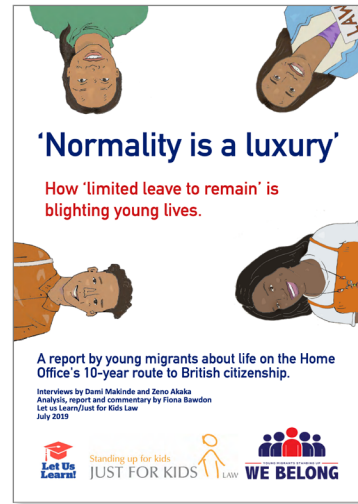
We Belong has previously published three research reports since our launch in 2019, based on in depth interviews with young migrants whose lives have been blighted by the 10-year limited leave to remain process.



We Belong  
2021



We Belong  
2020



We Belong/Let us Learn  
2019

Our Impact Report sets out We Belong's achievements during our first year as an independent charity and our plans for the future.



We Belong  
2020

