

# Reflections and recommendations on our ten year route campaign win

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OUR CAMPAIGN WIN:

**WE BELONG**

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# MESSAGE OUR CEO

# FROM



We Belong have been campaigning for a shorter and more affordable route to citizenship for over four years.

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In October 2021, we heard the news that the Home Office will be removing the ten-year route to settlement for young people who came here as children and are fully integrated. This route will be replaced by a shorter five-year route. This is a major campaign win impacting over 330,000 children and young people with precarious status in the UK.

In this (short) article we will be providing some initial reflections on our recent win, providing details on the timeline, our approach, and ending with key recommendations for the migration sector and funders to consider.

# INTRODUCTION

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In 2017, after consultation with our young activists, we began to focus on the root causes of the difficulties young migrants were facing. We recognised that the barriers to higher education that we successfully campaigned against were symptoms of a broader issue - formerly known as the hostile environment - which imposed a long and costly route to permanent status. The Home Office's tentacles infiltrated into society by creating gatekeepers who constantly questioned our rights and access to services despite our strong ties to the UK.

Our sights were now firmly set on the UK's broken immigration system. Our mission was to raise awareness of the impact of hostile environment policies on young migrants who were British-educated and to tell our own stories about belonging in an attempt to humanise the debate around migration. All of our young people were on a ten-year route to settlement, which came with a hefty price tag of more than £12,000. If they lost this status, our young people would be subject to further hostile treatment, their university and career hopes put on hold, and in extreme cases they could be at risk of removal from the UK.

We were in contact with around 1,000 young people in this situation, and it was estimated that there were over 330,000 children and young people around the UK with precarious status. Over the course of 4 years, our small yet mighty team of employees, young activists and allies embarked on a sustained campaign to called for a shorter and more affordable route to settlement - to change the story for ourselves and the many others impacted.

# ADJUSTING OUR FOCAL POINT

Between 2014-2016, the Just for Kids Law project Let Us Learn (which then became We Belong) organised and mobilised young migrants who came to the charity after they were denied a student loan. They were denied due to changes in the Education (Student Support) Regulations 2011 which required that students had to satisfy the lawful residence and settlement criterion. This meant that even if these young people were resident in the UK, with many arriving here as children and completing all their formal education in this country, their immigration status meant they were classified as international students. With no alternative financing available, university places had to be deferred or forfeited. For many of us, this was the first time we had been singled out for different treatment, from our peers.

After a successful intervention in the Supreme Court case *R v Tigere*, Let Us Learn hailed its first policy win. This success was estimated to benefit around 2,000 young migrants every year including many of our very own campaigners who could meet the new rules and were able to start their degrees. We continued to campaign for those who didn't meet the new student loan criteria. Through our 'Young Gifted and Blocked' campaign (est 2016) - featuring our 'Mincepie Friday' targeting vice chancellors - we convinced 25 universities to offer scholarships to young migrants.

After three years of organising young people to speak out about their barriers to education, we had created a platform for young activists which we call the 'core group'. The relationships we built established a community, which became not just a source of inspiration but also gave us a direct line to the experiences and concerns of young migrants after the changes to student finance policy.

Over the course of a year, we conducted listening campaigns and recognised that our problems as young migrants were just beginning. Yes, our immediate need to access higher education was resolved through our campaigning and strategic litigation. However, looming over us was that we were all on the 10-year route to settlement. Our interactions with the Home Office and the UK immigration system would not only disrupt our time at university, but remain a constant, demanding and unwanted companion many years afterwards. The need to constantly renew our immigration status, and fears of losing it, would rob us of the ability to plan our lives unfettered by Home Office delays, spiralling fees, and the unavoidable anxiety of trying to access services which required us to prove our right to remain in the UK.

# OUR COMMON PROBLEM

All of us came to the country as children. We were all granted Limited Leave to Remain in the UK by the Home Office, on the basis of our strong ties to the UK. It is only after 10 years and four successive, precisely-timed LLR applications, that we are able to apply for indefinite leave to remain (ILR), also known as 'settlement'. It is only then that we can be finally recognised as permanent UK residents. A year after that, we can apply for British citizenship.

We were all entering adulthood and into a ten-year legal limbo, where we were constantly reminded that in the government's eyes, we did not belong here. This went against everything we had previously believed: that the UK is our home, and we have spent many building our lives, education, and connections to this society.

We called ourselves 'British in all but Paperwork'. Together we agreed that for us to live fruitful lives we needed the Home Office to lower the costs and shorten our route to settlement. Our campaign ask was clear:

**'A shorter more affordable route to settlement'**

# RAISING AWARENESS IN A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

We have integrated communications support into our campaigning and advocacy work from the very beginning. We knew we were operating in a hostile environment, where any calls for increased migrants' rights was likely to generate a media and political backlash, if not carefully handled.

## Focus on Fees: 'Freeze our Fees Campaign'

We thought the toxicity of the political environment made it unlikely we would succeed in securing a shorter path to permanence or citizenship. Instead, we strategically decided in 2017 to focus our campaigns on the high cost of LLR. The Home Office had increased the application fees and introduced the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS), resulting in the price tag for each application of £1,493 in 2017. As a result, young migrants were entering adulthood carrying an immense financial burden. By 2019, the Home Office increased these fees to £2,033. In response, we launched our fees campaign calling for the Home Secretary to immediately freeze our immigration fees, pending a review of the impact dramatically increased costs on young migrants.

We raised awareness through articles in mainstream media, in schools by talking directly to students, and in parliament among MPs. In 2018, working with Principle Consulting we developed our public affairs strategy and focussed on our constituent-led advocacy model, where young people would meet their MPs and raise their concerns about the fees and the ten-year route. All of our interactions were conducted with the dual aim of alerting MPs to the facts, as well as providing clear actions that propelled our campaign forward. Acceptance of these actions enabled our young people to hold their constituent representatives to account. After a while, we started our own parliamentary events, as there were no APPGs or parliamentary groups focusing on our specific issues. Through our events, we were able to invite MPs to hear directly from young people what the immigration system is like for them.

In 2019, we contributed to a joint paper responding to the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration's report on fees. In addition, over 20 MPs signed letters and wrote to the Home Office on our behalf using a template provided by us. We believed our campaigning and advocacy approaches contributed to our first immigration campaign win in 2019, when there was no annual increase in immigration and nationality fees. The fees have since remained frozen.

## 1 **CENTERING LIVED EXPERIENCE: SHARING STORIES AND DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY**

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Our campaigns harnessed the power of narrative development. We listened carefully to the concerns and experiences of our young activists, creating strategic opportunities for them to share their lived experience. Our role as an organisation was to act as a conduit for young people interested in systemic change.

Through our monthly gatherings, we used our lived experience narrative as a mobilisation tool, and to develop a community of young migrants facing a shared injustice. Young people could relate to the personal experiences of loss, limbo, and shame, associated with being young migrants. The need to change the system which created these hostile experiences became a powerful call to action. We Belong believe that lived experience activism is a process of coming to terms with trauma; finding peace with your past; relating to others; and most importantly that sharing the truth is an ongoing act of defiance against the UK's immigration system.

Before we could embark on external facing campaigns, we developed relationships with all our young people, their wellbeing taking primacy over the need to raise the profile of our campaigns. Pushing individual young people prematurely into the mainstream media and the limelight can have the effect of retraumatising them and closing the door to their further engagement. Whenever a young activist shared their story, they were fully supported with aftercare and debriefs. Our young people are not a means to an end.



## 2 A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT: OUR ENGAGEMENT WITH MPS, MINISTERS AND CIVIL SERVANTS

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Despite the toxicity of the hostile environment, from 2019 to the present, We Belong were able to reposition our campaign in response to the Windrush Scandal and the Home Office's mission to rebrand itself. We switched our focus from fees to the long route to settlement, with the bold call for a 5-year route to settlement.

### Changing tides:

The Windrush Scandal sent shockwaves through our community, leaving young people feeling even more unsettled due to their immigration status. Many were concerned that the removal of British Citizens who had originated from mainly Commonwealth Countries would be extended to those on limited leave to remain. The outcry among migrant groups, wider public and mainstream media, concentrated on the fact that the Windrush victims had been part of the fabric of British society for decades. The role of the Home Office's hostile environment in the scandal was widely understood and universally condemned. The Guardian's instigative journalism was crucial to revealing the scandal and led to calls for policy changes and equalities assessments to be integrated within Home Office decision making.

In response to the changing environment, our initial campaigning highlighted the parallels between the Windrush Generation and our young people, warning that if our route to settlement is not reviewed, the government will face yet another scandal in years to come. We Belong's campaigning put the Home Office on notice of this very real danger, as we continued our outreach and identification of young people with limited leave to remain.

## 2 A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT: OUR ENGAGEMENT WITH MPS, MINISTERS AND CIVIL SERVANTS

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### Unintended consequences:

In 2019, we witnessed the increase in IHS being justified by the then Immigration Minister Caroline Nokes because it applied to 'temporary migrants'. The same phrase was used in Home Office comms and during a House of Commons debate on the IHS. Months later, we met with the minister in the same committee room where the surcharge was subsequently passed by a Tory majority. After sharing our lived experience in this meeting, the minister stated that we were the 'unintended consequences' of the policy, a policy intended for people staying in the UK for limited periods, not young people who have grown up here. This was a key turning point. It was the first time that a minister had admitted that Home Office had not expected or intended young migrants like us to be caught by the policy. After this admission, we made it our duty to work alongside civil servants and successive ministers to remedy this error.

The change we desired could only occur by changing secondary legislation, statutory instruments (SIs), which required us to have to have the support of Conservative allies as they were the party in power. Up until 2019, there was a fundamental flaw in our advocacy, as we were only engaging with Labour or Liberal Democrat MPs. This was partly because they were more responsive to our approaches, and because most of our young people tend to live in Labour held constituencies. However, with our Parliamentary Officer now employed, we changed our public affairs strategy to focus on developing relationships with Tory MPs.

## 2 A CHANGING ENVIRONMENT: OUR ENGAGEMENT WITH MPS, MINISTERS AND CIVIL SERVANTS

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This meant a change from our constituent-led model of advocacy, to one where we were contacting MPs cold, which required us to be persistent to ensure a response. This persistence more than paid off, because securing the Conservative MP Rt.Hon Tim Loughton as an ally helped us to gain support from other Conservative members, as well as an invitation to give evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee, the committee which the Home Office is directly answerable to.

A further government response to the Windrush Scandal was the creation of the Windrush Programme 'Community and Stakeholder Engagement Hub Build'. This provided the avenue for us to develop relationships with senior civil servants against the backdrop of the Home Office's new 'Face Behind The Case' campaign to humanise their approach and deepen community and stakeholder engagement. Since December 2020, we have had bi-weekly meetings with these senior civil servants, providing our lived experience expertise and feeding into policy in areas directly and indirectly linked to our campaign for a shorter more affordable route to settlement.

## 3 A SYSTEMS CHANGE APPROACH: STRATEGIC LITIGATING ACCELERATING THE PACE OF CHANGE

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We Belong adopts a system change approach to social change within the migration sector. This requires us to look beyond the periphery of the immediate problems being faced by young people; it is an investigative enquiry which demands actors understand trends and recognise the difference between symptoms and root causes of injustices. It leaves no space for competition, as it requires organisations to act collaboratively: the quest for social change being achieved through strategic partnerships, joint responses and through sharing power.

Strategic litigation was one of the earliest tools in our arsenal, we wanted to continue to ensure that we exhausted all avenues when trying to achieve policy change. In the spring of 2021, We Belong provided a witness statement alongside case studies of young people impacted to support the legal challenge to limited leave to remain by Islington Law Centre (ILC).

In September 2021, after many months on liaising with the Home Office, the Immigration Minister Kevin Foster wrote a letter confirming plans to change the route to settlement:

*'I have been fortunate enough to meet with 'We Belong' and hear first-hand their own accounts of their arrival in the UK as children and the efforts they have had to make to regularise their immigration status in the UK.*

*I attach great importance to the accounts they have given and am extremely sympathetic to the situation they have described, especially the unexpected difficulties they have encountered as young people who have lived in the UK either from birth or from a very young age. I have taken note of the points they make in their briefing about reducing the time taken to qualify for indefinite leave to remain for those in their situation, and about reducing the overall cost to them of the applications which have to be made.*

## 3 A SYSTEMS CHANGE APPROACH: STRATEGIC LITIGATING ACCELERATING THE PACE OF CHANGE

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*Priority for the Home Office, as part of simplifying the settlement provisions of the Immigration Rules, to address this and provide a shorter path to settlement for the 'We Belong' type of applicant.'* – Sept 2021 Letter from Immigration Minister Kevin Foster in response to a letter sent by Rt.Hon Dr Liam Fox on behalf of We Belong

As the strategic litigation challenge progressed, the Home Office were given a deadline in October 2021 to respond to ILC either by conceding the case, or elaborating on how it planned to defend the existing system to the court. This deadline prompted the Home Office to bring forward implementation of its planned change. It did this through issuing a 'concession' on the ten-year route, providing immediate relief for young people with LLR. The campaign win was therefore secured 6 months earlier than the expected timeline set out by the immigration minister, due to the deadline imposed by the litigation.

Once again, the law was used as an avenue to influence policy change and social justice. Our relationship with lawyers from ILC was collaborative and based on information sharing, both parties committed to securing change for young migrants. It is important to note that although We Belong's advocacy model has always been relational, and values-led, strategic litigation is inherently a confrontational tactic. In this instance, it was used to force the hand of the Home Office, providing a necessary accelerant that assisted We Belong in securing this win. With our involvement in the case being limited to providing evidence - rather than being directly involved as one of the parties to the litigation - we were able to maintain our relationship of trust with the Home Office, as an organisation they could continue working with to 'fix things'. Had our organisation been the claimant in the case, this might have hampered our relationships with civil servants and blighted our engagement post-concession, as the policy change still needs to be fine-tuned.

## SECTOR RECOMMENDATIONS:

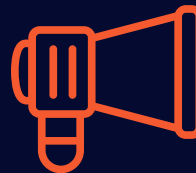
We Belong campaign on the ten-year route to settlement has highlighted the need to share power with young people, equip them with the knowledge and tools to interrogate the status quo and build lasting relationships with those in power.

Our journey has exposed the need for organisations and funders to work tactically by testing different approaches, creating compelling narratives, and taking an incremental approach to changing the systems which they are challenging.

While We Belong's journey and the change we have inspired are specific to the migration field, our approach to youth-led activism can be replicated in other fields. In Spring of 2022, we will be launching an in-depth evaluation of our campaign success, drawing on the experiences of all parties involved. In the interim, we wanted to provide key recommendations to organisations and funders engaged in policy change and youth-led activism.

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### 1 DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN CAMPAIGNING AND ADVOCACY



- A campaign is 'what you want changed' it is your 'justice ask'. It sets out your vision for society and the change you want to advance. It is your organisation's way of highlighting a problem and suggesting a solution. You will then embark on a journey to inspire others to join your cause. You might employ different methods of marketing this campaign, which may include participatory actions, led by those with lived experience, events, and media engagement.
- Advocacy is a sustained effort to engage with different stakeholders who have the power to make the change you desire, as highlighted in your campaign ask. This requires a deep focus on systems and relationships. While the campaign sets the direction of travel, your advocacy strategy needs to be agile, and reactive to external events in the policy world and society. It requires you to be realistic, to make compromises, where needed, and break down your campaign asks into achievable, incremental change.

## 2

### PLATFORM LIVED EXPERIENCE



Organisations should act as a conduit between people impacted by the issue and those in power.

- Your organisation should always prioritise the wellbeing of young people with lived experience; this takes primacy over campaigning, and associated project delivery demands.
- Think of ways in which your organisation can bridge gaps and foster relationships between young people, institutions and policymakers.
- The project/campaign needs an employed lived experience coordinator. This person will act as the main contact for stakeholders; this always ensures that your organisation is creating leadership roles for those with direct experience.

## 3

### COLLABORATE WHEN NECESSARY



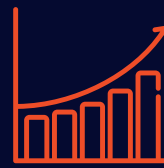
- Your organisation should have an accurate mapping of the policy area/campaign focus. This will allow you to identify when you need to collaborate or partner with others to prevent duplication.
- If you are working on a niche area of policy change, collaborations may not be necessary (or helpful) as your organisation is the lone expert, lived-experience voice on the issue. You therefore need to advance your campaign and advocacy strategy alone to ensure your messages are clear and distinct.

## 4 ADDRESS ASSUMPTIONS WHEN WORKING TO INFLUENCE POLICY



- Your organisation must be willing to live and breathe your values, but not exclude those who you disagree with or those who are different from you.
- Embrace the challenge of being opposed and develop creative, diplomatic responses to opposition arguments.
- Do not assume that civil servants and Ministers understand the intricacies of legislations and clauses, engage with them in simple terms, speaking always of the impact of their policies in practice.

## 5 FOCUS ON SECURING INCREMENTAL CHANGES



- A concession does not mean defeat; you are engaging in long-term change - a restructuring of society and changing of attitudes.
- Your campaign win will not occur overnight, so try to break down your campaign into sections; think about small wins along the way.
- Seek and seize opportunities that could raise your profile or build relationships with key decisionmakers, as they appear - even if at the outset they are not directly linked to your campaign.
- Recognise that growth in participation levels of young people with lived experience, and their confidence and involvement in projects, are great indicators that your organisation is making progress. This should be celebrated.

## 6 RECOGNISE THAT STRATEGIC LITIGATION CAN HELP YOU SECURE YOUR CAMPAIGN WIN



- There are various ways to engage in an active strategic litigation linked to your campaign and policy ask.
- Your organisation can either be a claimant, an intervener, or you can simply provide witness statements and evidence to support to litigation. You must ensure you consider the pros and cons of the role you choose to undertake and the impact on your ongoing advocacy strategy.



## **FUNDER RECOMMENDATIONS:**

### **1 RECOGNISE THAT POLICY CHANGE IS THE LONG-TERM AIM**



- Funding should be long-term to ensure stability for organisations you are working with. Relational funding of 5+ years allows organisations to embark on their journey free from funding scarcity. This will also signal to your grantees that you trust them to do the work.
- Understand that organisations are often battling with direct service needs of young people, as well as managing campaigns.
- Staff in these organisations may also be personally dealing with the issue they are campaigning to change on a strategic level.
- Develop reporting procedures that are based on reflection, as opposed to outcomes.
- At the assessment stage of applications focused on youth-led change, try to develop a process that is immersive for grant managers and organisations. Prioritise visits and in-person assessments which will enable you as a funder to understand the organisation, its needs and the team.

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### **2 LISTEN AND RESPOND TO THE NEEDS OF GRANTEEES**



- Think about the win organisations are seeking to secure and ways in which you could connect them with others to facilitate their changemaking journey.
- Funders are not outside of the movement: you are an active participant. By providing grants, you are signalling that you believe in an organisation's vision and mission to the extent that you will provide solutions to some of the problems they are facing.
- Solutions go beyond direct grants to wellbeing provision, personnel power in the form of introductions, knowledge sharing and beneficial partnerships. These bolt-on support options are invaluable to organisations.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 3 INVEST IN LIVED EXPERIENCE LEADERS

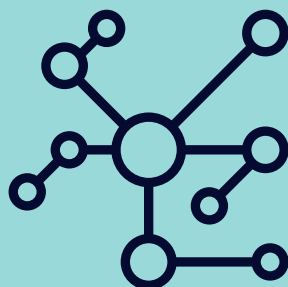
- Assess whether your funding processes, committees and governance structures are inclusive. Think about ways in which you could incorporate the talent, expertise and insight of young people with lived experience in your funding process from design to implementation; this is a meaningful way of sharing power with young people.
- Champion the work of young people and develop a case for support to encourage other grantmakers to invest in young people.



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## 4 FACILITATE INTERGENERATIONAL CONNECTIONS

- Organise purposeful, inclusive convenings, which allow stakeholders to reflect, gain insight and inspiration on their changemaking journey.



# **ABOUT WE BELONG**

**We Belong is an innovative new organisation led by young people who migrated to the UK. We work with and for young migrants like ourselves, who are subject to the hostile environment.**

**Our vision is to see young migrants living in the UK being treated equally and fairly in the society they call home. We fight to end the hostile environment around immigration, ensuring barriers preventing full integration for migrants are removed so that we can contribute to British society.**

**We work by setting and leading the agenda as we aim for better outcomes and opportunities for individual young people. We continue to campaign for shorter and more affordable routes to citizenship, equal access to higher education and developing young leaders to become changemakers within the sector.**

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