

**NEON**

**COVID-19**

**SOCIAL**

**MOVEMENTS**

**REPORT**

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**Lankelly  
Chase**  **Align**

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# INTRODUCTION

## PURPOSE

In May 2020, NEON commissioned Align to produce a report looking at how social movements in the UK are responding to COVID-19. Funded by the Lankelly Chase Foundation and building on existing NEON thinking and frameworks, the report covers the headlines on how actors from across the housing, migration and climate movements, 3 of NEON's core battleground issues, are responding to the coronavirus crisis.

The following report provides an analysis of the insights gathered from interviews focused primarily on the challenges experienced due to the crisis and ensuing lockdown, the ways in which work shifted, and the opportunities that materialised. Our hope is that this report can hold up a mirror to the movement by reflecting on shared trends and emerging needs and that it might encourage collective action around areas of convergence. In addition, we hope that these findings will provide funders with greater insight that informs how best to support social movements moving forward in light of the crisis and its impacts.

## METHODOLOGY

Align interviewed 27 representatives of groups and organisations working on housing, migration and climate with a standardised set of fifteen questions covering both organisation-specific questions and broader movement-related questions. The research was rooted in the movement ecology thinking initially developed by the AYNi Institute, as well as the movement life-cycle theory, developed by Bill Moyer, Movement Net Lab and adapted by NEON. Questions were posed during a one hour interview via Zoom with representatives from the following organisations:

Economic Change Unit - Extinction Rebellion (XR) - IMIX - Greater Manchester Housing Action - Coventry Asylum and Refugees Action Group - Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS) - Migrant Rights Network - Granville Community Kitchen - NEF - Youth Strike 4 Climate - Tenants Union Manchester - Cut the Rent - Transition by Design - Open House - Oxford Tenants Union - Strategy and Communications Group - Friends of the Earth Scotland - We Belong (Young Migrants Standing Up) - Shelter - Young Greens - Lesbians & Gays Support the Migrants - JCWI - European Climate Foundation - Migrants Organise - Labour for a Green New Deal - Green New Deal UK

The following priorities informed the process of selecting interviewees:

- Interviewees were selected taking into consideration representation from across the movements of climate, housing, and migration.
- Interviewees represented a range of organisational / group size, and role in the movement space.
- Interviewees were selected taking into account equitable representation across identity markers such as gender and race.
- Interviewees represented a range of seniority including staff and volunteers.



## SUMMARY FINDINGS

Our interviews took us down some expected and some unexpected routes.

We found that there have been stark differences in how the housing and migration movements were affected by COVID-19, in contrast to the climate movement.

All movements have been hit hard by the pandemic - emotionally, financially, and practically. At the same time, new spaces have emerged both in the political landscape, and in the digital one.

New coalitions and networks have sprung up in response to the crisis, and we highlight in particular the advent of mutual aid groups and the Build Back Better campaign.

Moving ahead, there is a critical need for more cross-movement spaces to reflect and formulate new strategies; for funders to reorient where and how they direct their funds; and for movements to keep working towards paradigm shifts.

We end with a series of questions that those in the NEON community may want to reflect on, considering the impact of burnout, the need to centre intersectionality, how to plan campaigns in a socially distant reality, and how to build on the political space that has been created over the past few weeks and months, not just by COVID-19, but also the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement.

# WHERE ARE WE NOW

## THE MOVEMENT LIFE CYCLE

Oftentimes organisers see movements for systemic change as linear, with a clear end point at which we will have 'won.' Angela Davis, Bill Moyer and a host of others have reminded us that it is much more useful and realistic to think of movements as having natural cycles which we can engage with.

The movement lifecycle theory looks at the natural stages or seasons a social movement will repeatedly go through. Knowing where a movement is in the lifecycle process can help ground and prepare movements for each stage and heighten the chances of success.

Below is an illustration of what a movement lifecycle looks like:

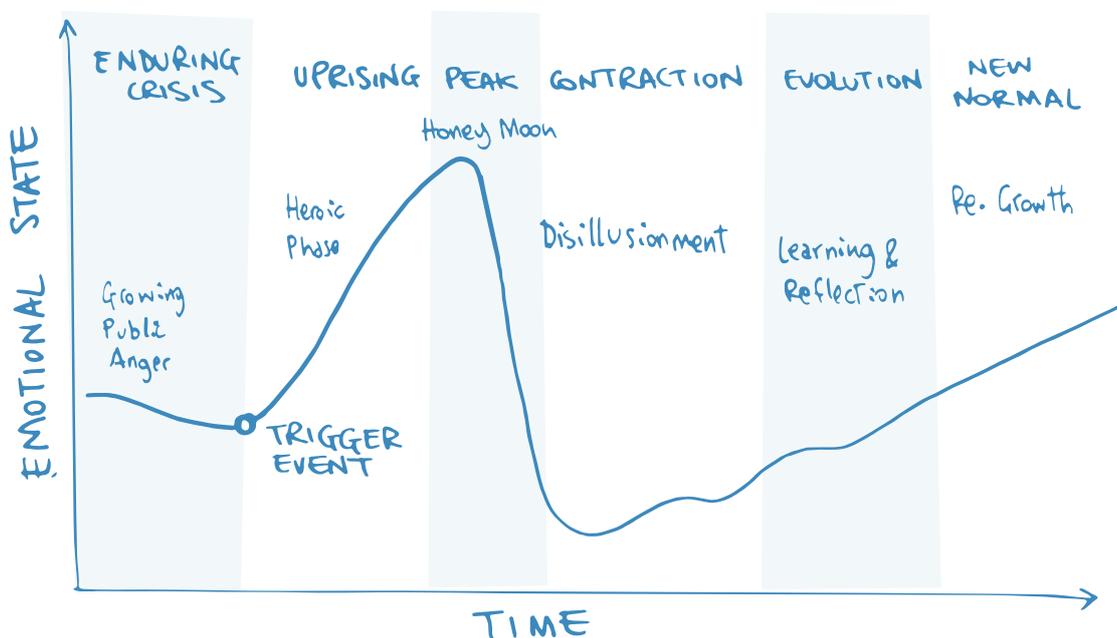


Image credit: NEON Movement Builders Participant Guide, 2019.

## CLIMATE MOVEMENT

The rapid spread of COVID-19 earlier this year and the lockdown that ensued can be labelled as a 'trigger event' in the context of a movement lifecycle. What quickly became evident from our interviews was that this trigger event impacted the movements of climate, housing, and migration differently depending on where they were in the lifecycle before the outbreak of the pandemic.

In the case of the climate movement for example, it had experienced a peak in 2019 in large part due to the momentum and attention following on from the youth climate strikes and the direct actions carried out by Extinction Rebellion. In early 2020, even before the advent of the pandemic, the climate movement seemed to move towards a period of 'contraction' or 'evolution.' While the message of urgency for climate action had hit home, there was a need to reflect on what came next. Lockdown inevitably led to a drastic drop in direct action, further supporting the need to move into a reflection phase.





## HOUSING MOVEMENT

The housing movement also experienced a trigger event from the pandemic, seeing a sharp increase in issues concerning housing being covered by the media and garnering more attention from politicians and the public. Recent months have seen a sharp rise in the call for and recognition of rent strikes and 1 in 6 UK mortgages took advantage of a payment holiday. But sharp inequalities have come to light in terms of how different communities have been impacted by their housing arrangements. Some migrant communities living in crowded shared housing were unable to self-isolate, increasing their vulnerability to COVID-19. Homeless people have been offered temporary shelter, but received inconsistent messaging from councils as to if or when this offer will end. This reality is in contrast to one of the biggest media stories in the UK during this time - the Chief Advisor to the Prime Minister, Dominic Cummings, flouting government rules to visit his second home during lockdown.

Similar to the migration movement, the housing movement still continues to be in a state of 'enduring crisis,' due to soaring casework and limited resources. The movement is smaller in size compared to others and so the impact from the pandemic is shared by a smaller number of organisations. The housing movement is also experiencing a pivot point of its own moving forward, seeing as private renters have received a large share of the spotlight in comparison to social housing and the need to address this will require attention.

Reflecting on where each movement is in relation to the movement lifecycle, it is clear that the climate movement is in a very different place in comparison to migration and housing. This is not just reflective of the increasing case work demands on migration and housing organisations during this time, but of how these different movements have been resourced and engaged with over time. For example, the climate movement in the UK has historically engaged predominantly white and middle class groups, and attracted more attention and resources because of that. Just as the impact of existing systems have been made more visible due to COVID-19, so have the dynamics between and across movements.



## KEY TRENDS

### A SYSTEM UNVEILED

“*The pandemic has brutally exposed the fragility of the system.*”

Amongst the climate, migration and housing movements, everyone interviewed spoke of the deep inequalities which have been at the heart of their work for years. The fact that systemic structures served to reinforce these inequalities for decades on end was already evident and many spoke of the impact of austerity, racism, the rise in far-right rhetoric, and the confluence of corporate and political power. But with the advent of the pandemic, these stark inequalities in our political and social systems began receiving much more attention from the media and the general public.

As a result, the wider public has embraced a more critical perspective due to inequities exposed by the pandemic: people from BAME backgrounds have been most likely to die from COVID-19; certain occupations have been redefined with NHS, public sector, retail and transport workers now all becoming ‘essential’ or ‘key’ workers when that was not the case before; the sharp rise in the use of food banks; the injustice of the housing market. As one participant said, the impact of coronavirus has “opened up certain realities to people that might have been less clear before.”

Another participant felt it became brutally clear to the general public that austerity measures imposed by the government in the past were based on ideology, not necessity, since the crisis “proved that the state does and can take radical action.” The government’s emergency response to COVID-19 included housing all homeless people within 10 days, at a cost of approximately 20 million pounds. Migrant surcharges and business rates were scrapped.



Consequently, movement actors seem to be more willing to think in bigger terms and be more ambitious in the demands they put forward having seen the kinds of responses that were possible in response to the pandemic. As one participant put it “if you demand things they can happen, like we saw with all flights being grounded in response to the crisis after years of demanding a decrease in air travel to reduce emissions. This demand was constantly disregarded as an impossible feat and yet all commercial flights were grounded overnight as a measure to halt the spread of the virus.”

Similarly, this shift was also described as having created a space for groups to start to receive support from people who saw themselves previously as apolitical. The fact that more people are being politicised as a result of the pandemic has been a point of intrigue for many, in particular raising the question of how to build on that for the future.

One example shared was the surge in applications for union membership, especially in the weeks after Boris Johnson urged people to return to work. Another example was from Stroud, where in the span of a week more than 1400 people joined the *Stroud Against Racism* group. Traditionally known as a conservative town, residents were now openly complaining about local Tory councillor Debbie Young retweeting Katie Hopkins. The momentum behind such examples could be used for more long term structural changes, re-shaping the political landscape of the UK.

## FROM PROACTIVE TO REACTIVE (OR FROZEN)

“Everything stopped. It took time to work out what was going on”

### Shifting Strategies

The sudden outbreak of the pandemic inevitably shifted organisations across the climate, migration and housing movements from a proactive, planning mode into a reactive, emergency response mode. As one participant put it, “Action has necessarily been reactive and responsive rather than proactive and strategic.”

In the case of the housing movement, for example, the work of many organisations pivoted towards rapid response campaigning to demand an eviction ban. The economic impacts from the lockdown meant many workers lost their income, and organisations in the housing movement needed to mobilise in order to protect people from getting evicted. While an eviction ban has come into effect until the end of August, some landlords are still forcing evictions on migrants, meaning there is room for collaboration between the housing and migration movements in order to collectively mobilise against this.

For the migration movement, work pivoted to focus on the immediate struggles that migrants faced during a pandemic in a hostile environment. Guidance was drafted for mutual aid groups on how to support migrant communities, and campaigns pivoted to focus on charges for migrant care workers, the suspension of the No Recourse to Public Funds visa condition, and indefinite leave to remain for bereaved families of NHS workers.

In the case of climate, the environmental effects of lockdown created an opportunity for some organisations to pivot and connect climate with air pollution and transport. There was a noticeable reduction in air pollution from having fewer cars and less public transport operating alongside the need for safer modes of transport, such as bicycles, which enable social distancing. This created an opportunity for some climate organisations to demand a change in city planning in support of long term changes inspired by the effects from lockdown. In a short span of time, several parts of the UK have in fact operationalised more areas for pedestrians and bicycles.

In the case of a minority set of organisations from the climate, migration and housing movements, the pandemic did not trigger a shift in strategies. Some groups mentioned the need to continue with the programs they were already running, since a subset of funders were less willing to accept requests to shift work in response to the pandemic. On the other hand, some other organisations did not stop their original work programs because they saw the rationale that not everything should be focused on COVID-19, and felt their plans still needed to be implemented. It's worth noting that this was a view amongst a minority set of organisations.

Another set of organisations that did not change strategies in response to the pandemic were small in size where the realities of having limited capacities and resourcing meant they were caught in a state of helplessness; frozen by an inability to pivot.

### New Tactics

Another key trend observed amongst organisations in the climate, migration and housing movements is that many had to change their tactics to build on the shifting strategies that materialised.

In the case of the climate movement, groups had to consider how they would now be able to operate in a world impacted by COVID-19. For those who had been engaging in direct actions, as in the case of XR and the youth strikers, these tactics were no longer feasible with the pandemic underway. Historically, a huge part of the climate movement has always gained its legitimacy from direct action. Wins achieved by the climate movement in the last few months were undoubtedly accelerated by XR (even amongst heavy criticism towards them), which made it possible to push climate up the political agenda. This key tactic hasn't been used by the climate movement these last few months but this may change going forward - it's important to note that in more recent weeks, protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement have taken place across the UK. This marks an important shift and stance towards direct action since the start of the pandemic.

Other tactical shifts were observed across movements, especially towards digital campaigning methods that amplified demands and engaged people in political education through webinars and long form content. For example, a coalition of housing groups recorded and sent a Zoom call to Rishi Sunak asking him to increase the level of housing benefit. Other organisations have pivoted to more traditional digital campaign tactics like petitions and online organising platforms.

It remains to be seen how permanent this shift in tactics will be, since the pivot was initially conceptualised as short term. As one participant said “Eventually returning to the same tactics seems like an assumption still held.”

## SURGE IN CASE WORK

“Our first steps were to make sure people were safe and provided for”

A visible and palpable impact amongst the migrant and housing movements, as opposed to climate, has been the sharp surge in case work needed to support beneficiaries. This support had encompassed legal support, provision of food, provision of tech needs (phones, tablets and data), and providing emotional support and advice in order to manage the increased levels of anxiety during the pandemic.

For example, organisations in the migrant movement have been called upon to support healthcare needs seeing as many migrant communities have been unable to receive the support elsewhere. Large numbers have been unable to go to a GP, with some Spanish-speaking communities finding it easier to travel all the way to Spain rather than wait the one month it takes to arrange translation access in the UK. The Department of Health & Social Care has so far refused to translate information sheets produced on COVID-19 because of a cited lack of resources.

Similarly, in the case of furloughs being implemented, it was not clear amongst many who this applied to and who was impacted, since all the information was available in English only. As one participant reflected on the impacts: “with time, it became clear that there was a lot of discrimination in the way furloughs were implemented. There have been many cases where white staff were furloughed, while staff of color were still requested to work, exposing them to a higher risk of contracting COVID-19. In some cases people not being adequately informed of their employment rights exacerbated this injustice.”

Undocumented migrants have been especially vulnerable noting the above dynamics, feeling that speaking up will only further endanger them. One example shared was the case of an undocumented woman working as a cleaner in one of the COVID-19 hospital wards. Exposed daily to the risks of contracting the virus, she was afraid to voice her concern fearing that she would lose the only source of income she currently has.

The pattern behind the lack of access to information and its detrimental impact amongst many migrant communities is a dynamic that was replicated in the housing movement. For example, there was much confusion with regards to housing rights under lockdown with little information made available. This oversight had a tangible impact, with some landlords continuing with forced evictions during the eviction ‘ban’ targeting migrants who have lost their income during COVID-19. Similarly, those who have been given temporary housing during the pandemic still do not know what their rights are and when they might expect to be homeless once again. Overall, there has been a level of inconsistency from council to council with regards to the clarity of information provided and distribution methods.

All of this has hugely impacted organisations across the migration and housing movements, requiring them to increase different forms of support they can provide to the communities they work with, while having fewer resources available and in some cases furloughed staff.



## DIGITAL DIVIDE

### “The digital poverty has been shocking”

The outbreak of the pandemic and the resulting lockdown has served to expose a shocking divide between those who have access to digital technology and those who don't. People across movements have experienced a real challenge with regards to lacking access to phones, laptops, wifi and data, in particular amongst low income groups and migrants. Some people have had to make dire choices in order to be able to allocate resources to meet those needs. For example, one beneficiary of an organisation we spoke to made a choice to buy data instead of food in order to stay in touch with the outside world during lockdown.

Some organisations have tried to step in to provide those in need with phones and SIM cards, but were met with an unexpected set of challenges. “We've been buying phones but were blocked by three networks for buying so many SIM cards, it looked like a scam,” said one participant. Another organisation opened up applications for phones when the pandemic first hit, but then had to close applications as so many people had applied.

Digital poverty has affected organisations as well. Some participants described the shift to remote working as exposing a lack of critical digital infrastructure and skills that would enable online rapid response work, and that they did not have the tools they needed in order to make digitally-focused work sustainable in the longer term. As one participant said, “There's been such a shift away from digital to in-person organising and next to that we haven't seen a massive uptick in the sophistication of the tech that these groups use to organise. So then once you pull away the chance of doing [in-person organising], the tech structure isn't there.”

For those organisations who were already digitally savvy and well resourced, the shift has gone well and presented new opportunities. For example, some found that working from home has given them more space and time to actually connect with people within and across movements. As one participant put it: “Not having to spend hours each day in long commutes has helped unlock a sense of freedom and time, which has enabled me to develop new work relationships even if remotely.”

Some in the housing movement spoke of the clear shift in how online organising, although it has not solved all work-related problems, has helped create a feeling of the movement being more open and equal in terms of who can now participate in meetings and discussions. For example, one participant shared how people with disabilities and children can now join meetings more easily, whereas before there were a lot of barriers in having to make arrangements to attend in-person meetings. Many felt strongly the need to hold onto this shift and continue to hold online spaces even after in-person meetings return.

## BURN OUT

### “The Internet is a wonderful thing, but zoom fatigue is real.”

The problem of burnout within social movements was real and palpable long before the pandemic. By March, social movements were still reeling from the impacts of the December general election, with many groups struggling to get to grips with the new political reality of a Conservative majority and a Labour leader who represented a centre-left agenda. The pandemic and ensuing lockdown only served to make it more likely that people working in social movements would experience burnout, impacting all not just on the professional level, but personal too.

Many spoke of the precarity experienced amongst those working in the climate, housing, and migration movements. These movements are powered by young people in their 20s who are themselves experiencing precarious housing or precarious work conditions. In the words of one of the participants, “In the case of the youth strikers, we’ve come to see the pandemic having a tremendous impact on our education, adding stress and anxiety to the worries we’ve already been holding in connection to the climate issues we’ve been campaigning and organising for.” Others are experiencing high levels of stress in securing income during the pandemic or finding time to support the causes they are involved in, which is very likely to affect voluntary capacity and support in movement spaces going forward.

In addition, access to timely information has been difficult for many, and the heightened effort it takes to coordinate distributed groups during crisis has been overwhelming. For some groups, they have found themselves needing to spend a lot of time and effort keeping track of rapidly changing developments while also having to explain to others what is going on and how these changes can be interpreted. One participant shared “My colleague is now spending most of his time on the phone with people in our network needing to explain to them what is happening since information is not reaching people and they can’t make sense of what is happening with so many changes happening all the time.”

The resulting impact from all of the above, is that many throughout the movements of climate, migration and housing are experiencing a sense of burnout, inertia, and mental, emotional and physical fatigue (triggering mental health concerns), all while needing to adapt to new modes of work which have themselves been exhausting for some. With work happening remotely and online, many now find themselves having to join back-to-back Zoom calls almost on a daily basis, with Zoom fatigue becoming a real issue for many. We outline some recommendations on how to address these impacts further down.

## NEW COALITIONS

“A lot of people have been forced by necessity to work together”

New and sometimes unexpected coalitions have emerged, largely due to the shift to remote working and the need to create new digital spaces to convene groups. Connecting digitally has made it easier for organisations to work together, with different groups commenting on how they’ve seen a lot of bridges being built across organisations that hadn’t sought to work together in the past, and a greater focus on intersectionality and connecting the dots between issues as a result. As one participant shared, the new coalitions hold the “potential to learn more from each other as new relationships are being built.”

Many also commented on the new spaces being created for deep learning and sharing through regularly organised webinars and expressed optimism in the power of these new online spaces to enable groups and individuals to come together around common messages and aims. For example, the *Can’t Pay, Won’t Pay* campaign launched by the London Renters Union was able to bring a lot of people together, many of whom came from outside the usual activist spaces. Similarly for the climate movement, the new window around campaigning on air pollution during the pandemic has led to new emerging coalitions. Many spoke about the positive impacts they are already experiencing from learning and cross-pollinating with other people and partner groups, especially when connecting with international groups and co-creating global strategies for the first time.

While some of these new alliances have led to positive outcomes, such as the new relationships established between rent strikers, unions and politicians, there are also other stranger and more concerning alliances blossoming; the relationship between landlords associations and the higher echelons of the Labour party, for example.

Piers Morgan came forward as an unlikely ally. Shortly after he was very vocal against the NHS charges for migrant care workers, the government decided to scrap them. Similarly, the Sunday Times, the Telegraph, and other tabloids have been running op-eds and articles featuring people who are questioning neoliberalism and acknowledging the inequalities it perpetuates, the failures in tackling the climate crisis, and the inability of the government to cope with the outbreak. Moving forward, some participants commented on the importance of remaining vigilant and aware of these new voices that are emerging across the spectrum.

## ACCESS TO FUNDING

“*We are all in the ocean drowning and they might give you a float but they won't get you out of the water.*”

The pandemic has brought into focus certain dynamics between organisations and funders. While there was an expectation among organisations that funders would allocate emergency funding in response to the pandemic, it seems that overall there was some dispensed but not as much as might have been expected. Some examples of how emergency funding was utilised include some migrant organisations having the resources and capacity to provide advice on employment rights on a daily basis, whereas before it was possible for this to be provided only once a week. Another organisation received 4 emergency grants, which enabled them to recruit an additional full-time caseworker supporting migrant women.

A pattern observed was that many organisations with existing, long-term relationships with funders experienced positive responses, including flexibility in terms of expectations, deadlines, and resources being redirected due to the impacts of the pandemic. But there were many challenges observed for those organisations (in particular smaller ones) seeking new funding. As one participant put it “we found ourselves having to jump through hoops in terms of the paperwork requirements being presented in order to be considered for funding support.”

It was commented that one of the large funders in the climate space made new funds contingent to COVID-19 related work, putting pressure on some organisations to pivot their work to answer to this new form of funding. Others were impacted by funders making resources available for pandemic-related work without being explicit from the beginning on the criteria they required for applicants, which then made the process more complicated and cumbersome on groups applying.

In the case of the migration movement, while a number of core funders offered extra funding to ensure groups could continue their work under the added stress of the current crisis (with some requiring simple application processes and others not requiring applications at all), this was observed to take place only amongst groups who had existing relationships with those funders. Other groups have had more difficulty, particularly those supporting migrants working in the frontline service sector.

Another issue that has come to light is the gap in funders supporting longer term needs, beyond the immediate emergency support that has been made available to some. Several organisations spoke of the need for strategic spaces where long-range planning can be discussed, as well as the systems needed to support those plans. So far, there doesn't seem to be funding available for this work and many are hoping for this to change to enable longer-term recovery work to begin in the foreseeable future.

One movement particularly impacted by chronic underfunding is the migration movement. One person we spoke to shared that she had spoken to 120 different groups in the last 3 months all working on migration, and they all spoke of the ongoing need for financial support and resources. *Migration Exchange*, a recent report on the migration movement, talked about very small organisations, often led by refugees and migrants, as being particularly hard hit by a lack of financial resources.

Another challenge voiced by many, which was described as ongoing since before the pandemic, includes organisations experiencing funding frameworks that serve to pit groups against each other. One example shared was how some funders would regularly ask applicants how their work is different and stands apart from that of other organisations working in the same movement. As one interviewee reflected “this has enabled a culture of competition, instead of encouraging groups to find areas of commonality and apply for funding that would enable collaborative work to take place. And we definitely need more collaboration so this framework definitely needs to change.”

While the move to online communication and engagement platforms has been described by many as enabling a more open culture within movements, some groups in the migration movement shared that they still experience a lack of transparency from some groups unwilling to share information openly with others. An example shared relates to hearing indirectly about funding opportunities being sought by some in the movement, which wasn't shared with others in order to avoid competition.

## MUTUAL AID

“ ‘Mutual aid didn't come out of nowhere, there is an analysis that underpins it’

Mutual aid groups and networks have been formed at an unprecedented scale in the UK during the pandemic. These autonomous groups emerged as a direct response to COVID-19, supporting communities to support each other, whether that was through food provision, emotional support, or sharing of advice, information, skills and resources. These groups follow in a tradition of mutual aid organising led by groups outside the UK like the *Black Panthers*, *Young Lords*, and *Food Not Bombs* in the 60s, 70s, and 80s respectively. More recently mutual aid efforts have been organised in response to disasters like Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the earthquake in Mexico City in 2017.

Activist and writer Dean Spade makes the following distinctions between mutual aid and charity:

- Whereas charity differentiates those who have from those who need and puts those who have in a position of power to make decisions about how to meet others' needs, mutual aid emphasizes working cooperatively to meet each other's needs. Charity is vertical; mutual aid is horizontal.
- Whereas charity addresses symptoms of systemic issues, mutual aid analyzes the causes of those issues and builds new social relations to help society be more survivable in the long-term.
- Whereas charity is often professionalized work performed through legislated nonprofit organizations, posing onerous bureaucratic accounting and compliance obligations, mutual aid projects avoid formalization to retain autonomy and flexibility.

- Whereas the charity funding model relies on the donations of rich individuals and profitable corporations, requiring the charity to publicize those donations to boost the public image of donors and for donors to continue to make sufficient profit to have enough left over to donate, mutual aid utilizes the resources available in their communities, often creatively seeking free supplies.
- Whereas charity implements criteria for who is deserving of assistance, mutual aid is offered to anyone.

Perhaps this distinction is why there has not been much formal crossover between organisations in the climate, housing, and migration movements and mutual aid groups. There's also the reality that organisations often had less capacity to engage, due to staff being furloughed. For example, one organisation had a plan to map out and contact each mutual aid group across London and contact them with relevant resources, but then staff were furloughed and the project stalled.

However, there has been some formal collaboration. For example, a range of migrant organisations put together **guides for mutual aid groups** on how to support migrant communities. Mutual aid groups have also been key in helping housing organisations identify needs among Latino communities and requesting relevant information to pass on to people in need of support.

The relative lack of formal collaboration may also be due to the large informal crossover of people who are involved in mutual aid organising and those who work for non-profit organisations. The organisers who seeded the mutual aid network in response to COVID-19 were all seasoned movement actors who had organising, facilitation, and movement experience and who could bring their strategy, analysis and skills into that space without the formal support or backing of any organisation.

As more staff within movements became furloughed, many of those with the time and ability redirected their capacity towards mutual aid efforts and informal coordination. The result has been grassroots groups using mutual aid networks to support a wide range of movement responses. For example, Lesbians and Gays Support the Migrants handed out PPE gathered from their local mutual aid groups at a recent Black Lives Matter protest.

Thousands of people across the UK have been engaged in local level political action, but the long term sustainability and direction of these groups could be greatly impacted by the easing of lockdown and reduced capacity as group members return to work.

# WHERE ARE WE GOING



## CLIMATE MOVEMENT POLITICAL DEMANDS

1. Tackling climate change, and other forms of environmental breakdown, through a just recovery plan that is fairer, greener, and includes resilient economic structures for the long term. Goals need to include: stimulating a low carbon economy, ending inequalities, creating green jobs inclusive of migrant communities, strengthening public services and creating cross border solidarity through funding a transition both in the global north and south, while strengthening democracy and human rights.
2. A new social settlement needs to include: a just minimum income for all, good unionised jobs, well-funded public services.
3. Governance structures need to embrace community assemblies as a way to strengthen transparency, accountability, inclusivity and empower citizens to be an active part of building the future we need and putting people and the planet at the center of decision making.

## HOUSING MOVEMENT POLITICAL DEMANDS

1. Impacts from the pandemic brought into sharp focus the need to put in place measures for rent controls connected to the demand for a minimum income guarantee. Until then, mandatory rent suspension and an eviction ban are needed. Waiting time for universal credit should be decreased (currently 5 weeks), and while the eviction 'ban' has been extended to August, it needs to be at least 12 months. Renters need to be given the same level playing field as landlords; legislative change is needed. In the longer term: the idea of rent deferrals needs to be rejected, which would take the form of rent increases in the aftermath of the crises.
2. End of section 21 evictions, whereby landlords can evict for absolutely any reason.
3. End of section 8 needed, whereby people can be evicted for being unable to pay the rent; which is not seen to be a valid reason to make someone homeless. Instead renters should have access to emergency financial support to help with rent.
4. Need to look at longer term needs for alternative housing solutions and providing more social housing to address the hostility of the private rent sector.

## MIGRANT MOVEMENT POLITICAL DEMANDS

1. Universal Basic Income for all migrant communities, particularly asylum seekers who are struggling with the limited financial support some receive while their cases are being heard.
2. An immediate regularisation of status, for all undocumented and under-documented people living in the UK.
3. Demands outlined by **FIRM, the fair immigration reform movement**, need to be met. These include: dignity, justice and action in protecting the rights and needs of all migrant communities.
4. There is a desire for the migration movement to come together and rally behind shared demands. In the case of the Status Now campaign for example, the movement is not yet united behind it with different visions on how these issues can be resolved.

## LONG TERM IMPLICATIONS

### BE REALISTIC, DEMAND THE IMPOSSIBLE

“Radical change does not seem far fetched now”

COVID-19 has been a tragedy, and we can not pretend otherwise. To do so would be to undermine the loss of lives and livelihoods during these last months. At the same time, the impact of the pandemic has shifted the political landscape in a way that creates space for more radical change. Not only have the shortcomings of the current system and our current government been exposed to all, it's also been proven that alternatives are possible. The government abandoned its orthodox conservative attitudes to state intervention and proved that the state can take radical action when needed.

The impact is, as one participant told us, that demands that require a paradigm shift seem like “the obvious, necessary, and feasible next step” - a position that might not have seemed possible directly after the General Election.

For example, the Green New Deal that folds in economic justice demands alongside climate demands has more relevance and urgency than ever, as we can see with the Build Back Better campaign. Due to the demographic of essential workers and those who have been most acutely affected by COVID-19, migrant groups have more political space to challenge the hostile environment that has been adversely impacting migrant communities for years. For the housing movement, “lockdown has shown the importance of having a safe and secure home”, as one participant put it, and shone a spotlight on just how many people don’t have the privilege of experiencing that.

Looking ahead, there is a need for more unified, intersectional, cross-movement demands that can bring people together under the banner of a ‘new normal’, that takes advantage of the wider political engagement we’ve seen across society, and that push beyond what was deemed possible in 2019. *Beyond COVID*, an initiative launching at the end of July looks to do this by aggregating a number of progressive arguments and using those to craft long term demands that avoid austerity.

A start could be demanding that some of the emergency measures we have seen rolled out during lockdown are put in place for the long term, with increased access to benefits and shelter. As one participant said, “Push for good conditions today, and it sets the tone for the next decade.”

## STRATEGIC SPACES

“There is a need for systems to know who is doing what where”

There are some particular areas that we think would benefit from strategic discussion and collaboration within and across movements.

The first is intersectionality. Many movement actors have been working towards and calling for greater intersectionality for years, and the advent of COVID-19 has only affirmed this need. There are many instances of political education efforts happening during the pandemic through online content and meetings and that must continue. “In a moment like this it is essential to see how everything is connected. Connecting race and policing, struggles across borders, race and health. It’s important work when you are able to see things as so interconnected and it’s important to allow for structural changes,” as one participant shared.

Another area is around creating the long term strategy and systems needed for when lockdown is eased. The government’s eviction ‘ban’ is due to lift in August, raids and deportations will resume again soon, and temporary accommodation arrangements for the homeless will end. There is currently “no planning for a coordinated response for when the government starts detention again, raids again, flights again,” one participant shared.

The majority of organisations and groups are still in “emergency mode” as one participant put it, and unable to start planning for a longer-term ‘new normal’ phase. This could make for a very difficult phase ahead.

The last suggested area for collaboration is a space for reflection and gathering lessons learned. There is a narrow window during the coming months to capture what has worked, what hasn’t, and where groups and organisations want to reorient their focus going forward, otherwise there is a danger of falling into habitual patterns and key wisdom being lost.

These topics and conversations will need the requisite skills and infrastructure to support them. Online facilitation training has been identified as a strong need across movements as well as access to the technical platforms for groups to connect, such as paid for Zoom Pro accounts. These will be crucial if international and UK-wide coalitions that have been formed during the pandemic are to sustain themselves.

## FUNDING GAPS

“There is an urgent need to transform current funding structures, which have been pitting groups against each other instead of enabling organisations to work together within and across social movements.”

We have identified many areas where funders could consider directing their funds over the coming months:

### Tech infrastructure

- Support in bridging the digital divide between organisations and support getting beneficiaries online

### Strategy spaces

- Making space and time available to dig into cross-movement long range planning, and reflection

### Trainings / skill ups

- Resourcing staff time to develop political education programmes and skills shares for people within and joining movement spaces

### Rest

- Burnout and mental health will continue to be a critical issue that movements must address, with organisational and funder support needed. Funders could take the lead of new actors like the *Resourcing Racial Justice fund* and prioritise making resources available for those movement leaders who need to take time off to preserve their mental and emotional health.

### Migrant movement

- The migrant movement is in particular need of support, in the form of funds for translations and strategic communications that can capture people's lived experiences. More campaign capacity is needed in both the migrant and housing movements.

There is also a need to reconfigure the relationships between funders and grantees as we move forward. In an ever shifting landscape, more continuous feedback loops and communication channels are needed. This could result in a better understanding of how funders can support ongoing work and ensure large scale decisions around distribution of funds are as collaborative as possible.

Now is also the time to consider how to distribute resources more equitably, so that a greater number of organisations and voices can come to the fore, including those grassroots groups who have historically been underfunded. “Funders need to give money to unfunded groups and shift their criteria,” said one participant, referring to the criteria that decides who is eligible for funding. A need for funders to investigate different structures and hybrid models was also voiced, such as third party services that can hold and manage funding for non-charitable groups. These models have precedent in the movements we're looking at, and may need to be used more widely to help address power dynamics within coalitions and centre political, as well as charitable, aims.

# BUILD BACK BETTER

“While the Build Back Better campaign has succeeded in cutting through movements, it has not (yet) cut through to the public.”

The Build Back Better campaign was seen by many as a clear (possibly the clearest) unbranded campaign effort that came together in response to the pandemic. The initiative was taken rapidly to convene organisations under a shared campaign slogan, with a series of demands that the pandemic made all the more necessary to address.

This gave rise to a wide coalition coming together (over 90 organisations have signed on thus far) in support of demands cutting across climate, housing, migration, economic recovery, social justice and more. This despite the convenors being organisers primarily engaged in the climate space working on the Green New Deal. The Build Back Better campaign was able to go beyond the messaging of the Green New Deal focusing instead on recovery messaging. This helped create momentum within and beyond the climate movement, supported by the speed in which this came together, the collaborative model of the campaign and an approach that was adaptive to whatever organisations were willing and able to bring to this forming coalition. Many viewed this campaign as reflecting how the appetite for vast change has encouraged organisations to join campaigns that are not specific to just one cause but that are cross-cutting between movements.

The Build Back Better campaign is being described as a recovery campaign, focused on medium term demands that need to be in place once the emergency phase has ended. In essence, the demands call for a recovery from the pandemic to be one that tackles inequalities from the climate crisis while making the economy resilient. With that in mind, the recovery needs to be one that is investment-led (no austerity), is in support of projects that are creating jobs, reducing inequalities, stimulating a low carbon economy, providing access to basic needs for all, and have people and the planet at the center of decision making.

The speed in which this campaign came together is one of many examples that sheds light on how organisations were impacted by the pandemic and how differently organisations were able to operate when confronted by this new crisis. For example, some organisations were able to operate in a rapid response mode, as seen for example amongst organisations able to play a convenor role for this campaign. While others were hindered by limited capacities because of having to furlough staff members or having internal bureaucratic systems that made signing-on challenging.

Some spoke of the difficulties that have arisen so far with the campaign that may affect its sustainability if left unresolved. For example, the momentum behind Build Back Better has resulted in other groups taking on the same slogan. While some are able to distinguish the campaign from those choosing to use Build Back Better as a slogan, this distinction seems to be present amongst a minority of people and hence this dynamic creates confusion that might prove more challenging with time in trying to reach a wider audience. Building on that, if the government continues to choose to use this slogan (as seen recently in remarks made by Boris Johnson), many agree this will become a real challenge for civil society to be able to distinguish its demands under the Build Back Better campaign from the narrative the government will push when using this same slogan.

# WHAT NEXT

We hope our findings will prove useful to those grassroots groups, organisations, and funders who are eager to reflect on the impact of Covid-19 on social movements in the UK. As well as outlining some of the long term implications we foresee, we also wanted to include a set of ending questions or provocations for the NEON community as we move into the future.

## HOW DO WE SHIFT STRATEGY AND TACTICS?

As outlined above, there is a need to coordinate and prepare for the moment when evictions, raids and deportations start again, and to ensure that public attention is drawn when that happens.

**?** *What do organisations and groups need in order to prepare, and how can funders support them? How could mutual aid groups be involved, or trained? What does it mean to take direct action in a more socially distant reality, and what are the implications, if any, to long term strategy and planning?*

## HOW CAN WE PREVENT FURTHER BURN OUT?

Burnout compromises the longevity of all movements. Burnout and mental health will continue to be a critical issue that movements must address, with organisational and funder support. Migrants, people in precarious housing, BIPOC, disabled people and those with chronic health conditions, and young people in our movements will continue to be hit hardest by the effects of COVID-19 and the resulting recession. Sharing responsibility, skills, resources, advice, and support will be crucial to the long term health of our movements and the people in them.





*How can we better support people in our movements who are directly impacted by COVID-19, whether physically, mentally, or financially? How can we emotionally prepare those working in movements for the inevitable contraction period in the movement lifecycle, that will come as lockdown eases and public and media attention is scattered?*

### HOW CAN WE SUPPORT MUTUAL AID GROUPS?

Over 4000 mutual aid groups have formed across the UK and Ireland in response to COVID-19. Some may not need or want support from organisations, and will remain active. Others may find they lose capacity as people return to work or face economic hardship after the furlough scheme ends, and lose access to the online training and political education that has been on offer during lockdown, such as the NEON Movement Building webinars, the Know Your Rights trainings from Black Lives Matter, and the Ella Baker School of Organising trainings.

*? How can social movement organisations ensure that access to training, skill-ups, and workshops is available to mutual aid groups as needed, and how can they continue to collaborate with mutual aid groups to help facilitate the local support and direct action that we have already seen take place during lockdown?*

### HOW CAN WE CENTRE INTERSECTIONALITY?

New coalitions and new connections have formed as a result of COVID-19, particularly the broad church that has gathered under the banner of Build Back Better. Migrant groups are using their platforms more explicitly to highlight racist policing and immigration policies.

*? How can these coalitions build and maintain an intersectional analysis that advances each movement's goals? Is there space to more directly centre housing and migrant demands in environmental campaigns? Who is at the table of these coalitions, who needs to be invited in, and who needs to be funded to host their own tables?*

What is the inner work that people within movements need to undertake in order to connect the dots between issues, and not be co-optive of grassroots efforts? How can people be supported to ensure that intersectionality is not just a strategic aim or messaging tool, but a daily practice of community care and accountability that informs how coalitions work together and how they are led?

## HOW CAN WE KEEP EXPANDING THE POSSIBLE?

We've seen the public and the state acknowledge and take action around some of the long standing demands of social movements due to the COVID-19 crisis. As a result the nationalisation of public services, an end to a politics of austerity and the hostile environment, and stimulus policies that support job creation and environmental protection seem more possible than before the pandemic. How can we keep our strategies fixed on these visionary goals, even as political leaders start to shift back to a business-as-usual narrative?

*? More than that, how can progressive movements keep challenging themselves to go beyond even their current articulated goals? The response to George Floyd's murder in the US has created the space for abolitionist demands that organisations like Cradle Community and Community Action on Prison Expansion have been leading on but that the majority of the UK left have not centred until now.*

*? 85,000 people in the UK live in prisons. What would the UK look like if there was enough housing for all of these people? How can the migration movement move away from a carceral logic that perpetuates the good vs bad immigrant narrative, and keep focused on the violence of the system itself?*

*? At a moment when the general public is having to make very personal interpretations of the law in some cases, due to broad lockdown messaging, where are the openings for a vision for society that moves away from current systems and builds on the alternatives that mutual aid groups have provided?*

NEON will be working across the housing, migration and climate movements in the coming weeks, months and years to support them in navigating these questions and more. We hope the reflections offered in this report open up new avenues for thought and action as we emerge into a new reality.



NEON is a network of over 1,600 UK organisers from 900 different civil society groups. We run powerful trainings and support campaigns to help progressives win social, economic and environmental justice.

# NEON

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