

Learning summary

Police Bill Alliance

July 2022

Introduction and scope

This learning summary draws on reflections from members of the Police Bill Alliance (PBA). We have attempted to reflect the diversity of opinions shared. As such it is not intended to represent consensus nor the position of any one individual or organisation. Rather it seeks to highlight the range of opinions shared in terms of what worked well and what could be improved, in the hope that it may be useful for future coalition campaigning efforts.

This summary covers reflections on the PBA's ways of working and the impact of the external environment on our approach.

Written by Rosemary Forest and Kathleen Christie

Background

The Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Bill was introduced in March 2021. Over 300 pages long, the Bill represented a serious assault on the rights and freedoms of the UK public, in particular the right to protest and criminalising Gypsy and Traveller communities' way of life. Five organisations – Liberty, Friends of the Earth, Quakers in Britain, Friends, Families & Travellers and Bond - established the Police Bill Alliance (PBA) to campaign against parts of the Bill. The same organisations comprised the core group that coordinated the campaign.

Campaign focus

The PBA originally sought to have Parts 3 (on protest) and Part 4 (on criminalising trespass) removed from the Bill. When that was no longer feasible, we pushed for amendments that would mitigate some of the worst impacts of the Bill. Organisations working with Gypsy and Traveller communities form a small sector and being part of the wider alliance was an important way to extend their campaigning and advocacy reach, and therefore their impact. The core group wanted to actively demonstrate solidarity with the Gypsy and Traveller communities but, at times, we failed to maintain the balance between the two, as will be discussed below.

Coalition identity and approach

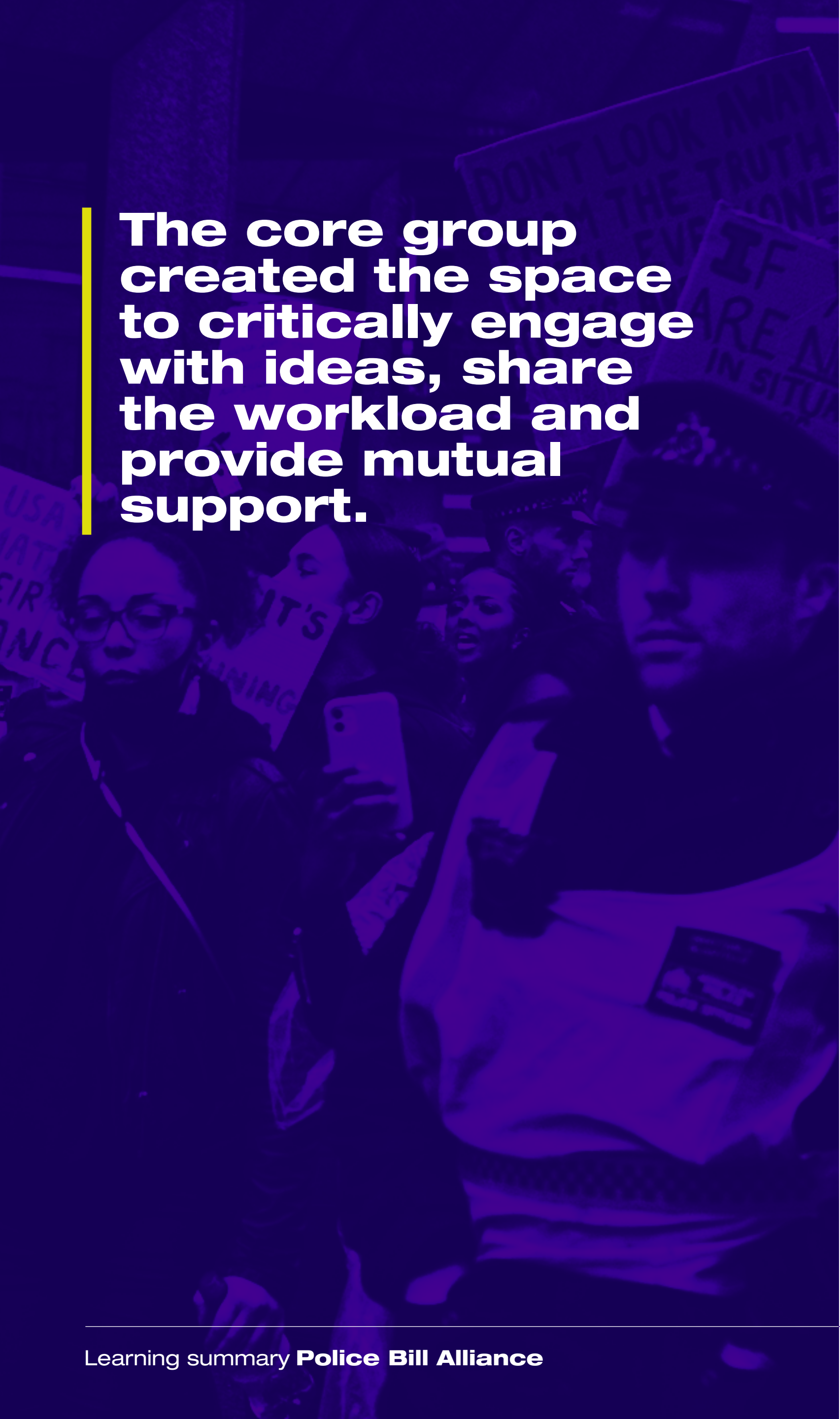
As an informal alliance, the PBA made a conscious decision not to lead activity with the campaign name or logo, nor for one organisation to front the campaign. Overall, PBA members felt that this approach worked well for several reasons, namely:

Not leading with one name/logo, and putting aside organisational ego, enabled us to employ an array of tactics and activities that not all organisations would usually feel able to participate in and allowed campaign members to use different messages that others in the alliance may have been uncomfortable with.

It ensured a range of organisations, groups and networks could remain loosely committed - participating and contributing at different campaign moments as their capacity and interest allowed. The lack of an overall leader enabled the alliance to continue over the 14 months of the campaign as it wasn't reliant on one individual or organisation's reputation, capacity or energy.

Some PBA members suggested that the alliance identity (the name 'Police Bill Alliance'), should have been developed early in the campaign. Instead, it was developed in August 2021, several months after the campaign began. An alternative opinion expressed was that developing the coalition identity earlier would have been time-consuming and it is possible we may have lost potential allies in the process. The coalition identity was identified as one of the most useful tools for engaging supporters but there was a sense that Parliamentarians didn't recognise the alliance's identity. The limited coalition identity and lack of a coalition spokesperson were perhaps more challenging for communications and media specialists, due to the knock-on delays for joint media interventions.





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How we organised

Working behind the scenes, the core group created the space to critically engage with ideas, share the workload and provide mutual support. There was a steadfast commitment to joint decision-making with a recognition that each organisation in the core group brought different skills, insight and resources. High levels of trust were developed and strong interpersonal dynamics helped cement a supportive environment during challenging moments.

As smaller (arguably more nimble organisations) the core group avoided being seen as the ‘usual suspects’. However, it lacked diversity in that all participants were white. The participation of Friends, Families and Travellers was important in ensuring that Part 4 remained an integral part of the campaign. Yet, while we rightly deferred to Friends, Families and Travellers on Part 4, we recognise that this also placed significant pressure on them to check messages, respond to questions, direct strategy etc.

In the first few months, the core group was relatively slow to make decisions – perhaps in part from a fear of being undemocratic or too directive. This vastly improved when weekly core group meetings were introduced, allowing the group to deal with emerging issues. Conversely, the number of standing meetings across working groups, core groups and consultant management resulted in some core group members spending a disproportionate amount of time in meetings.

From a transparency and accountability perspective, however, it is not clear how much the wider coalition was aware of the core group, or even knew it existed.

Impact of additional capacity

The core group secured funding from Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, through a top-up of an existing grant, and Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust. Core group member organisations topped this up with their own funds to bring in three part-time consultants with specialist skills in convening, communications and public affairs. The consultants reported to the core group as a whole, rather than to a specific organisation. A range of views were expressed by PBA members in terms of who benefited most from this additional capacity – some suggested the consultants were most beneficial to small organisations both in the core group and wide alliance, while others felt they made the alliance more cohesive and enabled it to do more.

A key part of the convenor role was identified as reaching out to diverse organisations at key moments, particularly those who did not want, or didn’t have the capacity, to take part in working group meetings.

From a practical standpoint, management tasks including recruitment, contracting and donor reporting took up significant amounts of core group time. Similarly, the onboarding of the consultants was time-intensive and recruitment during peak holiday time, in August for funding reasons, was challenging, particularly as the campaign was plunged into high gear at the start of September.

Ways of working

Information sharing and planning took place through two weekly working groups, one focused on parliamentary activity and the other on mobilisation and storytelling. In both groups Part 3 (on protest) notably dominated the focus. It was not entirely clear how much working group members did independently on Part 4, other than signing up to join letters and briefings, or why they were less vocal on Part 4. A separate group comprising conservation, access and environmental groups was an early additional resource on Part 4 and campaigning to protect the right to roam. However, many organisations' resources became increasingly stretched due to their parallel activity on the Environment Bill and by autumn 2021, the group was disbanded but most members continued activity within the wider coalition.

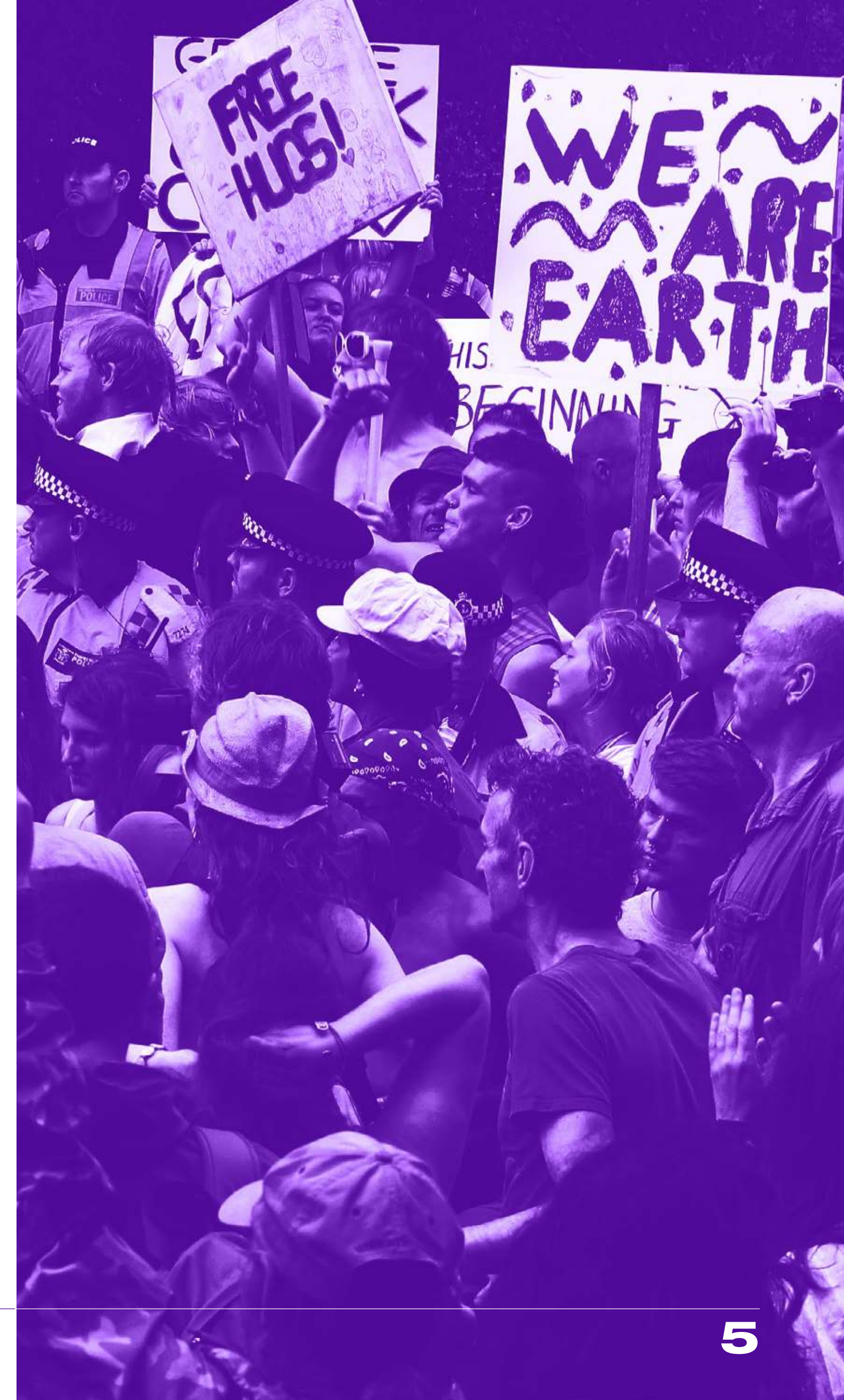
The parliamentary working group fluctuated in terms of participant numbers - participation was generally highest just before or after a crucial vote or announcement. The focus was retained by a small number of very active members who had strong connections, and great ideas and were able to take action forward. The group also proved to be a very important space for sharing intel and resources and bouncing ideas around. It wasn't always as coordinated as it could have been in targeting MPs and Peers, which may have frustrated some members.

The mobilisation group had less consistent membership and that was a disadvantage as momentum was hard to maintain. That said, it was instrumental in organising a massive joint petition and supporting some joint lobby activity.

Mobilisation of different sectors

The PBA mobilised diverse stakeholders, including civil society organisations from across sectors, businesses, and some less usual high-profile champions including Deborah Meaden. Most of the allies were from England where we had an existing support base to build from. To help allies engage and take action, the core group produced a range of resources for flexible use as people wished. Joint parliamentary briefings highlighted the scale and diversity of concerns and we encouraged organisations that were less involved or less confident on specific policy points to use the key messaging documents we regularly updated. The PBA convenor proactively reached out to more marginalised organisations and networks to ensure they were up to speed and felt able to take action where they were best placed.

However, despite active attempts, we were notably less successful in attracting support from campaign groups and organisations that resonated with Conservative MPs. In part, this was down to a lack of resources and time required to build trust and establish new relationships. The government also was able to frame it as a Bill to address Extinction Rebellion (XR) protests and Black Lives Matter, both of which are seen to be unpopular with the political right, which made it harder to mobilise across the political spectrum. Unexpected allies emerged, but we didn't manage to bring on board those who held differing ideological standpoints.



Support for social movements

A significant number and range of activists, groups, networks and organisations sought to either stop or amend different aspects of the Bill. Grassroots groups were active at different times during the Bill and early on, they participated in the mobilisation group. We recognised that as civil society organisations that have particular ways of working it was important that our advocacy did not inadvertently undermine the grassroots. The PBA consciously chose to avoid language that could feed into the frame of “good” or “bad” protesters, instead of speaking about the motivations for people’s need to protest in the context of inaction from the government.

This became especially important after the Insulate Britain protests calling for a national programme to ensure homes are insulated, which blocked major roads.

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Parliamentary engagement

With concerted effort, the alliance was able to build good relationships with Labour and Liberal Democrats on both Parts 3 & 4 in both houses but fell short in building relationships with Conservative MPs. While several Conservative backbench MPs raised concerns with measures in Part 3 during the second reading of the Bill, this disappointingly did not translate into amendments during the Committee stage or votes during ping pong.

Opinions on Labour’s support varied, with the recognition that there was some initial success but after the reshuffle in November, some found it harder to access the Labour front bench. Turnout to vote in the Lords on Part 4 in December, unfortunately, meant we lost by a single vote. In hindsight, there is broad recognition that the PBA could have done more to push the Labour front bench ahead of the December vote on Part 4 (especially when compared to the subsequent effort on Part 3 from January onwards). At the same time, in part, our level of efforts from January onwards on Part 3 were a result of having seen what happened to Part 4.

There is also a feeling that the Government’s late amendments to Part 3 and the process in which they were introduced unified the House of Lords, to vote against the measures.

Some PBA members felt that we could have been more coordinated in our MP outreach – while others recognised that with our capacity and time limits this was done to the best of our ability.

Media coverage and strategy

PBA really struggled to place media throughout. From September onwards it felt like one big media story after another was dominating and it was hard to get cut through. From autumn onwards we tried to secure media coverage in centre-right media, to appeal to Conservative backbenchers. Those Conservative or cross-bench op-eds we did secure however were quite impactful and combined with the letters from former police officers, helped broaden the narrative. Some expressed concern that in the process we forgot to speak to our base with the focus on op-eds and articles that would appeal to backbench Conservatives. And while organisations may have updated members/supporters via email lists, the Bill was largely absent from media over the autumn. It felt like momentum as a whole was decreasing in the run-up to December but with the Government amendments and George Monbiot’s first article in early December, it reignited the debate in a very public way (but primarily focusing on Part 3). It was suggested that it would have been better to start the media work earlier in the campaign, if we’d had the resources, and continue beyond December, again resource dependent.

Concerns were raised however that there should have been more coordination with core group members comms colleagues and a media consultant, and perhaps between core group media colleagues themselves. At times, the core group’s need to prioritise meant that joint statements etc were left to the last minute and perhaps comms colleagues could have been integrated in some way.

Conclusion

The Bill became law in April 2022 and provisions came into effect in June 2022. However, as a result of our campaigning, we stretched the Bill out for 14 months, raised awareness about the impact on Gypsy and Traveller communities and stopped dead some of the Government's most authoritarian plans introduced at the last minute. While the external context is constantly changing, we hope these reflections may be useful for future coalition campaigning efforts.