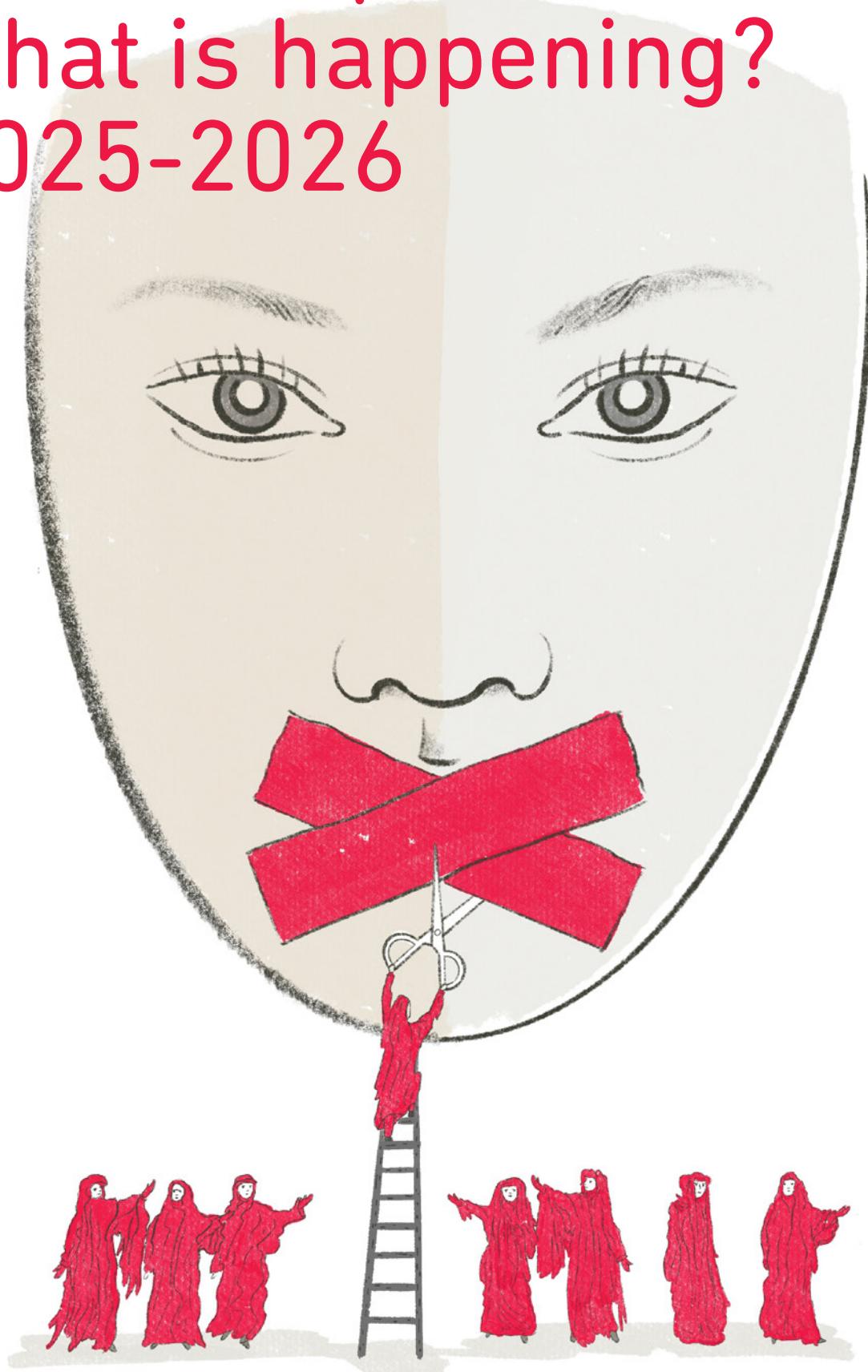


UK civic space: what is happening? 2025-2026



About Bond

Bond is the UK network for organisations working in international development. We connect and champion a diverse network of over 350 civil society organisations to help eradicate global poverty, inequality and injustice. We work to influence governments and policymakers, develop the skills of people in the sector, build organisational capacity and share expertise.

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UK civic space:
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Introduction

Bond has continued to track and analyse changes to civic space in the UK. This is our third and final annual report identifying trends across UK civic space, which we define as the political, legal and regulatory environment in which civil society exists. This review roughly covers the period between April 2025 and

January 2026. During this time we have seen trends both intersect and deepen from previous years. While trends overlap, we have made every attempt to categorise them as clearly as possible, but it is important to be aware of their intersectionality.



Protest rights

Trend 1:

The government's position on protest rights becomes clearer

Trend 2:

Increased restrictions for pro-Palestine protesters



Rise in nativist populism

Trend 3:

Rise in nativist populism threatens migrants, charities and rights



Civil Society Covenant

Trend 4:

A slow start to the Civil Society Covenant



Protest rights

Over the last 10 months, the government's position on protest rights in the UK has become clearer as new, restricting legislation has made its way through parliament. Those protesting in solidarity with the people of Palestine have also experienced increasingly stricter measures.¹

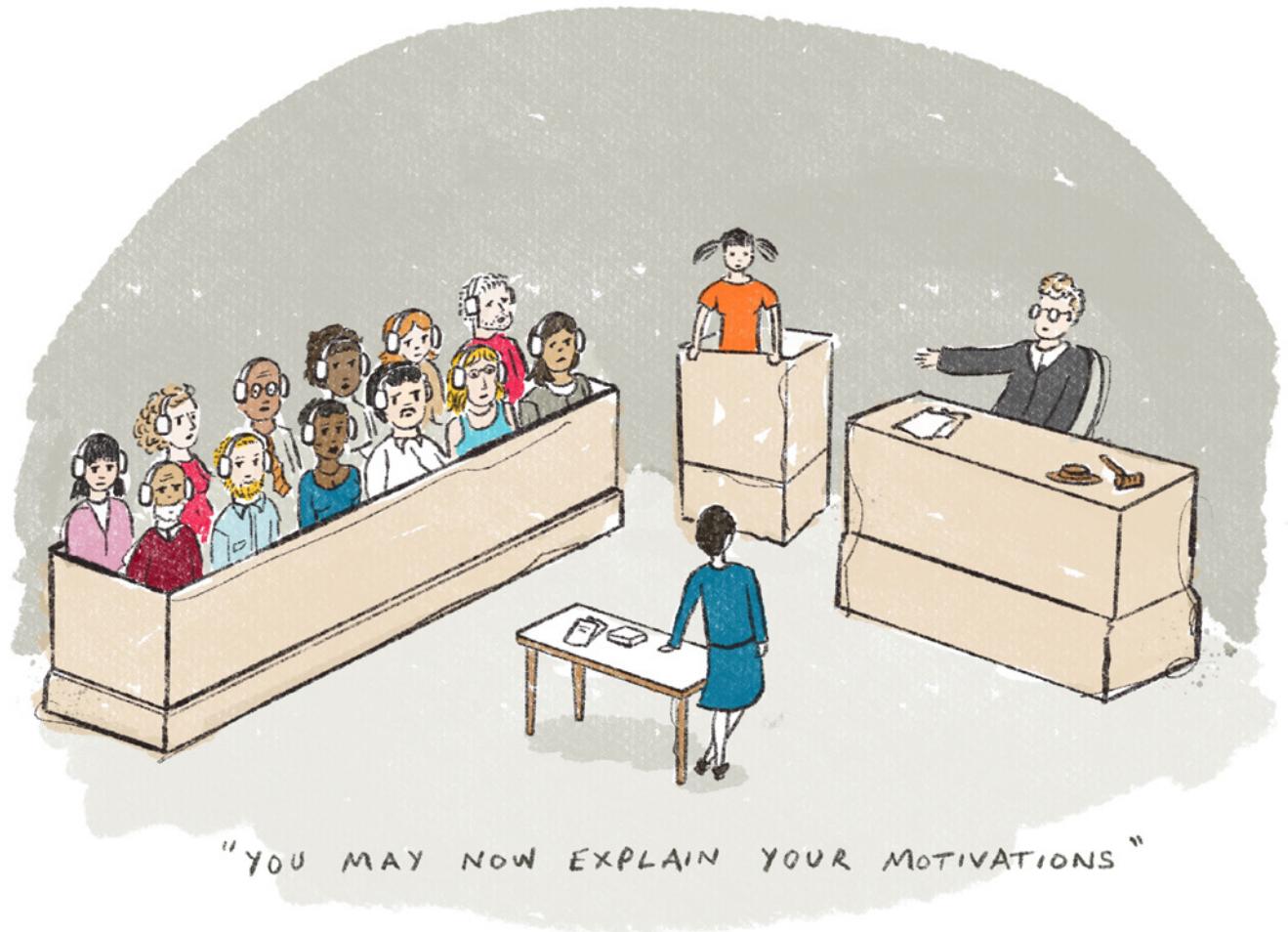
Trend 1: The government's position on protest rights becomes clearer

In May, the Court of Appeal dismissed the government's appeal and ruled in favour of human rights organisation Liberty, finding that the government acted unlawfully in 2023 when it introduced a new definition of 'serious disruption'.² These regulations allowed police to take into consideration the 'cumulative disruption' of different protests. When Liberty won at the Court of Appeal, the regulations were quashed. Liberty had first won the case in May 2024 against the previous Conservative government, but the ruling was appealed by the Labour

government after the 2024 general election, raising concerns about its position on protest rights. Over the following months the government's position on protest rights became clearer with the introduction of the Crime and Policing Bill. This is the third piece of primary legislation covering public order and protest in four years. If passed, it will give police expanded powers to further restrict the right to protest, and it adds yet another layer of complexity for protesters to navigate.

The bill revives measures from the previous government's Criminal Justice Bill which failed to pass the stages needed to become law due to the general election. Police are already able to compel people to remove face coverings and have a range of powers to prevent harassment and intimidation. The Crime and Policing Bill will give police new powers to arrest anyone wearing a face covering at a designated protest, and to impose conditions on the route and time of a demonstration if they suspect that protestors will intimidate people at a place of worship.





In October, the government announced further plans to give police powers to place conditions on repeat protests, as well as a review of public order legislation.³ An amendment to the Crime and Policing Bill means police will be forced to consider the 'cumulative impact' of similar demonstrations that have already taken place and decide whether to impose restrictions, such as moving a demonstration or restricting the time of it, with a potential punishment of prison time for non-compliance. This decision was made in the aftermath of the Manchester synagogue attack. The government also points to the protests outside asylum hotels as further justification.

The government has been criticised internationally for these restrictions. UN Special Rapporteurs have decried what they describe as "disproportionate sentencing"⁴ towards peaceful protesters, and have accused the government of paying lip service to climate goals while criminalising activists.⁵

On a positive note, three Just Stop Oil protesters who sprayed Stonehenge with orange powder were cleared of charges by a jury who deemed

that the protest was planned in a way that showed consideration to avoid damaging the landmark, and the disruption caused by the protest was minimal.

However, an announcement made by the Justice Secretary in December that the government intends to restrict jury trials to specific public interest cases raises concerns.⁶ Peaceful protesters have previously faced restrictions in court when explaining their motivations to a jury because jurors in other cases had acquitted defendants after understanding their motivations and reasoning. This is a trend we identified in previous annual reviews.

Police forces' use of facial recognition technology continues to increase.⁷ However, in December, the government announced an open consultation on a new legal framework to govern law enforcements' use of this technology, which is a positive step toward ensuring privacy rights are respected.⁸

Trend 2: Increased restrictions for pro-Palestine protesters

This year has seen a significant rise in restrictions on protesters demonstrating in solidarity with the people of Palestine. According to the CIVICUS Monitor, 60% of all its recorded violations against Palestine solidarity took place in Europe, with the UK identified as one of the countries involved.⁹

In June, the Home Secretary announced the decision to proscribe Palestine Action as a terrorist organisation after protestors from the group broke into an RAF base in Oxfordshire and spraypainted two planes.¹⁰ MPs voted to proscribe the group by 385 votes to 26. The vote on proscription also covered two white supremacist organisations. After the vote, several MPs reported that they had felt unable to vote against the ban and instead chose to abstain because they did not want to vote against the proscription of these neo-Nazi organisations.¹¹

The ban on Palestine Action came into force in early July. Since then, there have been over 2,000 arrests for supporting a proscribed terrorist group, and this number looks set to increase.¹²

There has been some confusion over what constitutes support for the proscribed group. In one instance, a protester holding a sign in support of Palestine was accused of supporting a proscribed group, despite there being no reference to Palestine Action. This was raised in parliament in July, and in October the police issued a formal apology and agreed to pay damages to the protester for being threatened with arrest under the Terrorism Act.¹³ Another protester was

arrested and then later de-arrested for wearing a T-shirt in support of 'Plasticine Action'.¹⁴

In October, the Prime Minister announced that, as part of a wider review of public order legislation, the government would consider further restrictions which would ban the use of some chants at pro-Palestinian demonstrations.¹⁵

In the days following the Manchester synagogue attack, and leading up to the anniversary of the Gaza conflict, the Prime Minister urged pro-Palestine protesters to postpone planned demonstrations out of respect and recognition for grieving communities.¹⁶ While it is understandable to want to reduce tensions, describing the choice to participate in pro-Palestine protests as "un-British" was unhelpful, especially as many racial justice campaigners often take part in these demonstrations.¹⁷

Actions taken by the government in response to pro-Palestine protests have been criticised both within the UK and internationally. The UN described the proscription of Palestine Action as a misuse of terrorism laws¹⁸ and urged the UK government to review counter-terror legislation to bring it fully in line with international human rights standards. The Independent Commission on UK Counter-Terrorism Law found that the current definition of terrorism is too broad and risks an 'overreach in application'.¹⁹ Human rights groups and others have also written to the Attorney General urging the government to review the decision to proscribe Palestine Action.²⁰

Michael O'Flaherty, the Council of Europe's Human Rights Commissioner, has also criticised the proscription, saying the law changes have allowed authorities to "impose excessive limits on freedom of assembly". The commissioner has urged the UK to review protest laws to combat the risk of over-policing.²¹





Native populism



Trend 3: Rise in nativist populism threatens migrants, charities and rights

Public debate on asylum and migration has become increasingly intense, and is further reinforcing social divisions, while anti-migration rhetoric and policies are now mainstream. This growing hostility is underpinned by nativist populism, a political ideology that is anti-rights and frames immigration as a threat to national identity and economic stability.

In April, 136 organisations wrote to the Prime Minister urging him to stop demonising migrants and instead focus on uniting communities, but the government has continued to use inflammatory language.²² In May, the Prime Minister said the UK risked becoming “an island of strangers” unless rules on migration

became tougher, a comment compared by many to Enoch Powell’s infamous ‘rivers of blood’ speech.²³ Campaigners have also criticised the language used by parliamentarians when discussing migration.²⁴

Support for political parties that adopt anti-rights – and specifically anti-migration – positions is growing. In May, the Reform Party, which has committed to abolish Indefinite Leave to Remain, won many seats in local council elections. Other political parties have adopted much tougher positions on migration. In November, the Home Secretary announced major reforms to immigration policy, which were welcomed by far-right activists.²⁵

Politicians have continued to criticise the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). While Labour has said it will attempt to change the way the ECHR is

interpreted by UK judges to stop asylum seekers challenging deportation,²⁶ the Conservatives would leave the convention entirely,²⁷ as would Reform which also commits to abolish human right laws and temporarily leave the UN Convention on Human Rights in order to deport up to 600,000 'illegal migrants' over five years.²⁸

In July, anti-migration protests began outside asylum hotels following the arrest of an asylum seeker. By mid-August, anti-migration protests had spread across the country, alongside pro-migration demonstrations.

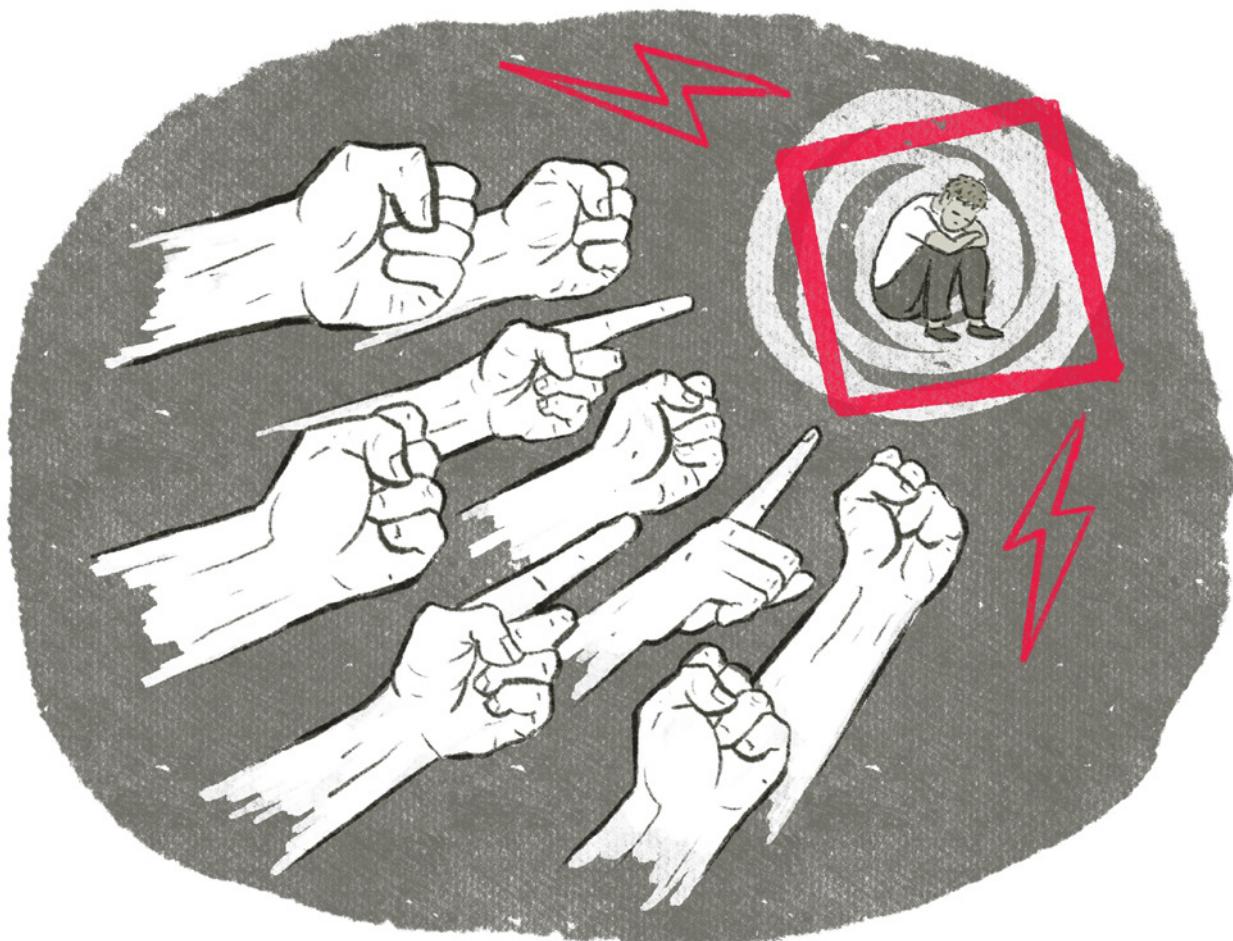
The far right also appears to be gaining in strength. In September, 150,000 people joined a rally led by far-right activists.²⁹ We have also seen far-right actors exploit moments of crisis, such as hate incidents, to fuel Islamophobic and antisemitism rhetoric, using social media platforms to continue to promote violence.^{30 31}

It is within this increasingly febrile and divisive context that charities working with migrants and refugees are facing increased threats of violence.

Staff and volunteers from several organisations that work to support migrants and refugees have been intimidated and threatened, resulting in these organisations temporarily closing their offices to keep staff and volunteers safe.³²

Charity leaders have written to ministers on multiple occasions urging them to stop using migrants as scapegoats and have also condemned the increased targeting of migrants in the media.³³ The Charity Commission has also publicly come out in support of charities, stating that it will support trustees to ensure staff and volunteers are kept safe.³⁴

We are concerned that growing threats to charities, as well as to the people who work and volunteer for them, will cause additional harm to UK civic space as organisations working on certain issues may feel less safe to engage in advocacy and campaigning, or to continue their operations.





Civil Society Covenant

Trend 4: A slow start to the Civil Society Covenant

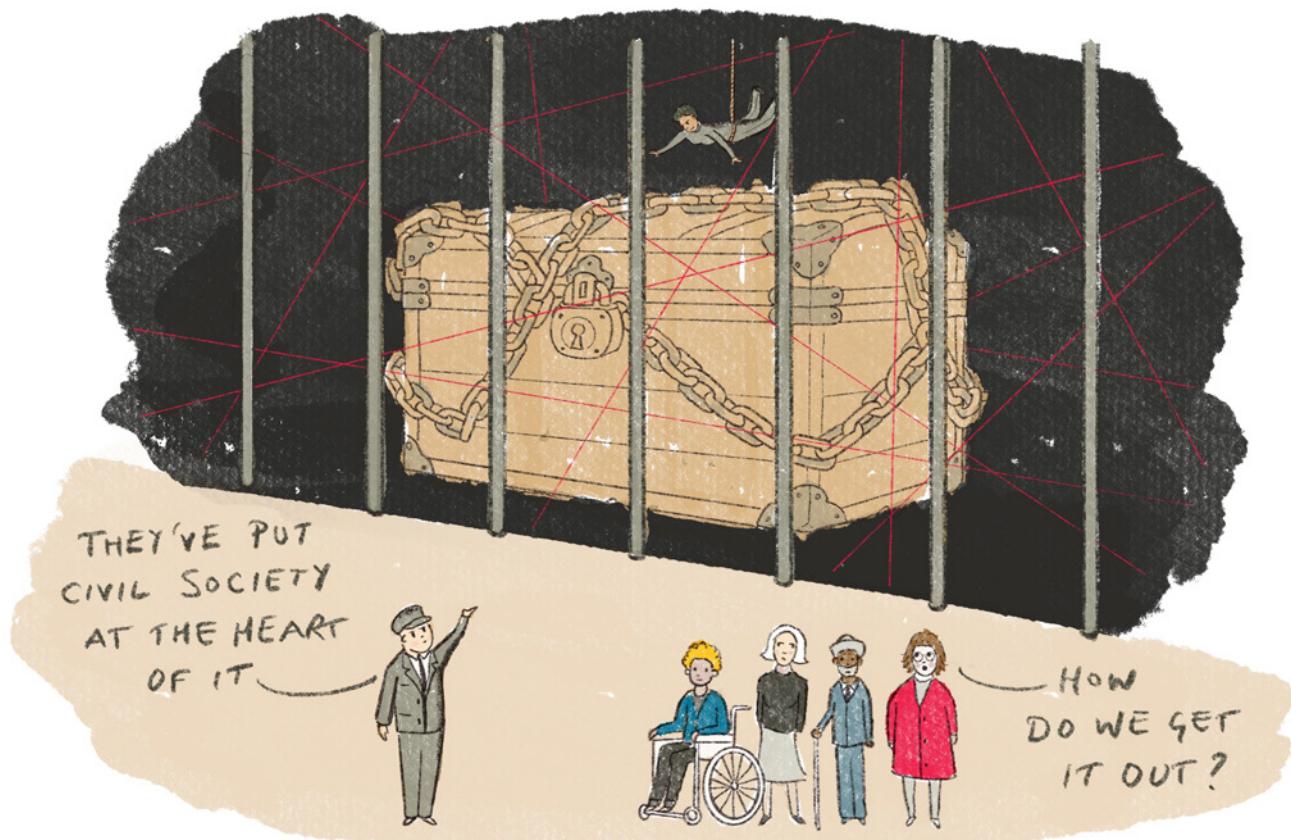
After almost a year of consultation with civil society, the government published the Civil Society Covenant in July. The covenant is an agreement between civil society and the government which aims to rebuild and strengthen this relationship after many years of neglect, and sometimes even hostility.

The Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport launched the covenant, signalling a high level of support within the government for it. At the launch, the Prime Minister expressed his hope that the covenant would provide "a way forward in partnership – together – by giving civil society a home at the heart of government".³⁵

Previous governments excluded civil society organisations from policy discussions, which caused trust to breakdown. The new government and many sector

leaders saw the covenant as an opportunity to move to a new way of working, focused on partnership and engagement. Many in civil society welcomed the covenant as a step in the right direction, but at the same time stressed the importance of moving beyond warm words to focus on agreeing practical mechanisms to ensure the commitments made in the covenant are realised.³⁶

Months after the launch, momentum across civil society has been dwindling as little progress has been made on implementing the covenant. Establishing the Civil Society Council was delayed, despite the government describing the council as central to the covenant's direction and the strategic oversight of its implementation.³⁷ However, in December progress was made when the government began inviting expressions of interest to join the council, which will now sit in No. 10.³⁸ The council is expected to set up two initial task-and-finish groups, one on local implementation and one on funding models.



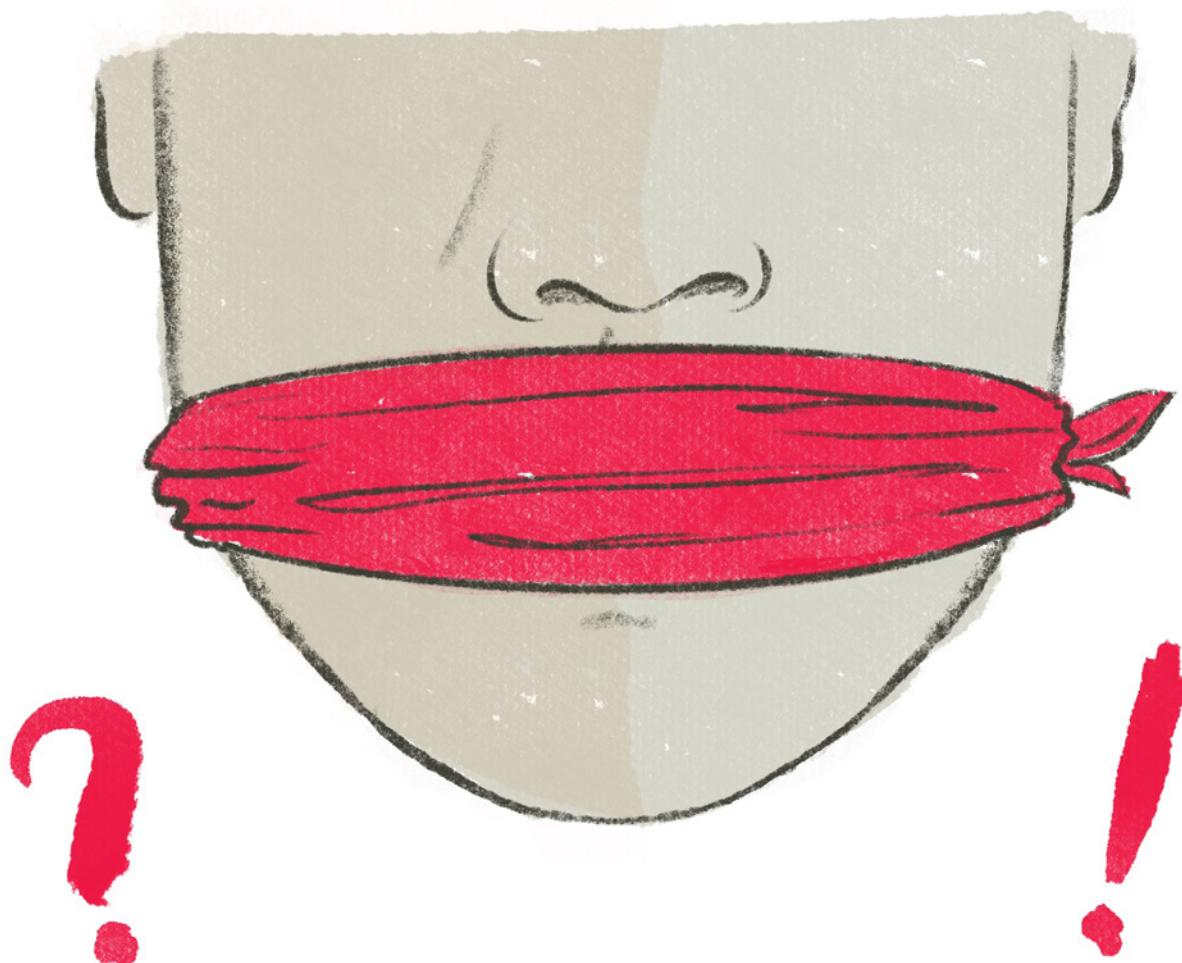
The lack of consultation with civil society has also been highlighted by the UN, which found the UK government breached its duty to involve the public and ensure proper participation when drafting post-Brexit legislation that would significantly affect the environment. The current government refused to endorse the UN's findings in November, raising concerns that this could set a precedent among other countries.³⁹

Although the covenant stresses the importance of campaigning, it quickly became apparent that it is unlikely to lead to the reforms required to create an open and vibrant civic space. In the document, the government promises to 'respect the independence of civil society organisations and ensure they can advocate for those they serve and hold government to account without fear of reprisal'.⁴⁰ It also promises to build 'a strong democracy where all people can participate and where all voices are heard'.⁴¹ This includes 'protecting the right to engage in peaceful protest'.⁴² But at the covenant's launch, the government said it had no plans to make any changes to the non-party campaigning

rules, which hamper civil society campaigning at elections, or remove any anti-protest measures from the statute.⁴³

One commitment the government made in the covenant was 'to review policies and guidance related to the model grant and service contract templates to ensure they are clear, and consistent with the principles in the Covenant'.⁴⁴ The government has already amended its anti-advocacy clauses set out in its grant standards and grant model contact. However, despite the government's commitment to partnership working in the covenant, it is still listed as 'lobbying' and included under 'ineligible expenditure' in both the standards and the model contact, although it is allowable 'where this is directly relevant to achieving the outcomes specified in the grant agreement'.⁴⁵ The gagging clause in the service model contract has not yet been changed.

In December, the government announced a feedback service for charities on the government grant standards, a positive step in the right direction.⁴⁶



A final note

This is Bond's third and final civic space annual review, highlighting trends across UK civic space. If you haven't read the previous reports, we encourage you to go back and see how trends have overlapped and deepened during this time.

Over the past three years we have identified trends that include increased restrictions to protest rights, the rising use of facial surveillance without legislation to safeguard its use, and how fewer people are engaged in elections. But it is also important to recognise the positive developments we have seen. On multiple occasions, charities across civil society have stood in solidarity with those who have come under attack. And as we begin 2026 there is hope that positive developments, such as new coalitions forming, will strengthen civil society.

Our hope is that by reading these reports, civil society and campaigners have been better informed about the changing operating environment in the UK and have been able to use this knowledge to campaign for all our rights and freedoms.



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