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Annual Report 2020

## Unlock Democracy Annual Report 2020

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## Foreword

*“The best-laid schemes o’ mice an’ men gang aft agley”* wrote Burns. It’s certainly been a year for unforeseen challenges.

Since our last annual report, we’ve seen the UK’s third general election in five years, the UK’s departure from the European Union, and, of course, the global chaos caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Each of these has had a profound impact on British democracy – and equally significant impacts on how we campaign for a better democracy.

It’s also been a year of changes for Unlock Democracy. We were joined for the year by four talented new members of staff, giving us the capacity to run exciting and experimental campaigns, bringing new methods and practices to life in

our **Demand Democracy** campaign and producing a range of resources throughout the lockdown period.

Our long-standing Director, Alexandra Runswick, left at the end of 2019. 2020 also saw a new Council elected, with many new people joining our governance structures and bringing new ideas.

Looking ahead, we have exciting plans for volunteer-led campaigns on **Community Democracy** and imagining a **Democratic Future**.

Whatever the next year brings, we’ll keep campaigning for real democracy in the UK.

**Jessica Metheringham, Chair**

# Electing a new Council

As a membership organisation – and as firm believers in putting democracy into practice – Unlock Democracy is governed by an elected Council, and members voted in a new Council in spring 2020.

This was an exciting election, with over thirty candidates standing for election, many of whom had joined Unlock Democracy in the last few years. Seven council members were re-elected and are joined by eleven new members.

With the election taking place during the Covid-19 lockdown, we took the opportunity to hold our first-ever online candidates' hustings, with candidates answering questions from members and

putting forward their ideas for how Unlock Democracy should work and campaign in the future. There's a truly impressive range of experience and ideas in the new intake of council members.

Following the first Council meeting in July, **Jessica Metheringham** was elected as Chair of the Council and six others were also elected to Management Board.

A big thank you to everybody who stood for election, submitted questions for the hustings, or simply voted – however you took part in these elections, it's hugely appreciated.

Thank you also to all those who served on the Council between 2018 and 2020,

particularly former co-chairs **Jack Maizels** and **Danny Zinkus Sutton**, and to those who were elected in 2020 but have since resigned – **Sophie Franklin**, **Mike Madgwick**, **Peter McLaverty**, **Sab Jones**, and **Phil Starr**.

You can find details of who is on the Council, including the manifestos they stood on, by visiting:

[www.unlockdemocracy.org.uk/our-council](http://www.unlockdemocracy.org.uk/our-council)

*Our Council members are drawn from across the UK and from a wide variety of political backgrounds.*





## Our staff team

At the end of 2019, the Director of Unlock Democracy, Alexandra Runswick, left the organisation after nearly two decades working here and with our predecessor organisations.

Alex was Director from 2013, responsible for guiding the organisation through seven remarkable years in British politics, from the Scottish independence referendum, through Brexit and to the chaotic 2019 general election.

As Director, she worked hard to establish the Brexit Civil Society Alliance, helping to facilitate a coordinated response across the sector to the challenges and confusions of the Brexit process. That work is continued by the BCSA team and we hope to continue to facilitate close working across the sector in the future.

Alex devoted a huge amount of time and energy to Unlock Democracy and we wish her the best for the future.



This wasn't the only change in our staff team this year. We bade farewell and thank you to our Finance Manager, **Arti Vyas**, who left in March 2020 after six years with Unlock Democracy.

Last year, we embarked on an ambitious plan to reinvigorate our campaigning and bring a new audience into the campaign for real democracy.

We were lucky enough to be joined by four excellent campaigners for most of the last twelve months, and although they've now left Unlock Democracy, we wish them every success for the future.

So a huge thank you to:

- **Trudie Kee**, Campaigns & Operations Officer
- **Ana Guzmán Ortiz**, Digital Communications Officer
- **Rob Abrams**, Activism & Outreach Coordinator
- **Matthew Hull**, Membership & Fundraising Assistant

# Campaigning through Covid

**Any annual report for 2020 would be incomplete without mentioning the Covid-19 pandemic.** Its sudden spread and severe impact prompted radical restrictions on rights, with democratic structures pushed beyond the limits to accommodate new restrictions.

It also caused a swell of community spirit and democratic cooperation in action, as people rallied together. Our campaigns since March have used both angles to raise questions about what democracy should, and could, look like in times like these.

Closer to home, Unlock Democracy staff switched to home-based working in mid-March to safeguard staff and the community around us.

The pandemic forced us to pull the plug early on our March crowdfunder campaign, and cancel several face-to-face events.

However, we've made the switch online for meetings, and in the range of events we've held for audiences across the world. Our AGM in November will be held digitally. Covid-19 might have slowed us down, but it's not stopped us from campaigning.

# Looking ahead

**Some of the challenges of 2020 are ones we saw coming – others caught us, and the whole world, by surprise.** But how are we looking to the future, beyond 2020?

At the time of writing, we're in the process of recruiting a new Director to bring their vision to the organisation and work with Council and staff to take Unlock Democracy forward. It's hoped that they will be in place by the end of the year, ready to take on the challenges of 2021.

We're also embarking on two new campaign themes, imagining the **Democratic Futures** that could emerge after the Covid-19 pandemic, and working in local communities across the UK to engage with local government and build **Community Democracy**.

But the impacts of 2020 won't be left behind easily. The pandemic has meant we haven't been able to realise some of our campaign plans, and like many organisations we've seen our fundraising falter, as people have other priorities for their donations, or aren't able to give any longer.

The year ahead is also going to involve a radically different staff team, which will mean a period of adjustment; as well as shifts in our governance, as everybody gets used to conducting meetings online.

So what will 2021 bring? We may not achieve a new, codified constitution in the next twelve months, but that doesn't mean we're not going to try.





# Our campaigns

**Unlock Democracy's unambiguous long-term goal is a new, people-powered codified UK constitution.** In the last year, we explored hot-button topics such as the climate crisis, migration and of course, the pandemic to explore why our democracy needs much more participation.

In November we piloted our innovative **Demand Democracy** campaign, aimed at welcoming new campaigners to our ranks via workshops exploring democracy in unusual ways. We took part in Extinction Rebellion's autumn 2019 action, as well as workshops in several UK cities.

We planned to continue this educational route to our campaign with a conference in May – but Covid-19 had other plans. When lockdown appeared inevitable, we

hit pause and carefully reflected on new priorities for a truly unprecedented year.

Since then we ran our online **Democracy Gathering**, a 12-part podcast exploring the key issues of the pandemic through the lens of democracy, and launched the **Resources Hub**, a treasure trove of DIY resources for anyone wanting to get stuck in to campaigning for a better democracy.

As autumn drew closer, we ran two more exciting online events with grassroots leaders from Chile and Iceland, and a stimulating Q&A with Peter Geoghegan, author of *Democracy for Sale*. As we write this, we're busily planning our campaign to see off the government's new threats to democracy, and building support for a new vision for democracy post-Covid.

*In September 2019, Unlock Democracy staff joined thousands of school students and supporters as part of the Global Climate Strike.*





In autumn 2019, led by Rob Abrams, we launched **Demand Democracy!** This was a pilot to discover how Unlock Democracy could apply cutting-edge movement building methods to our fight for a democratic society.

The team prepared energetic branding designed to appeal to younger activists, a suite of workshops and a detailed induction programme to get new campaigners active quickly.

A 'movement DNA' was carefully written to set out non-violent and inclusive principles allowing anyone who agrees to take action under the new banner.

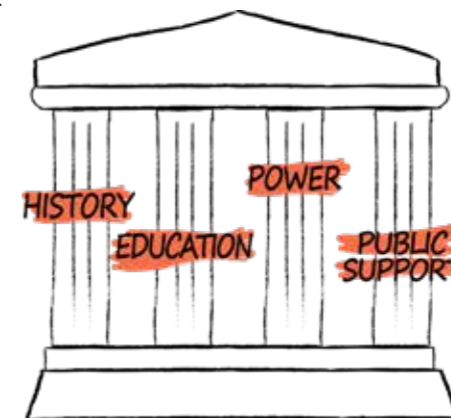
As well as promoting the campaign at the September climate strikes, the team took bright

banners and inspiring resources to hold a *Disrupting the State* workshop at XR's September actions in London.

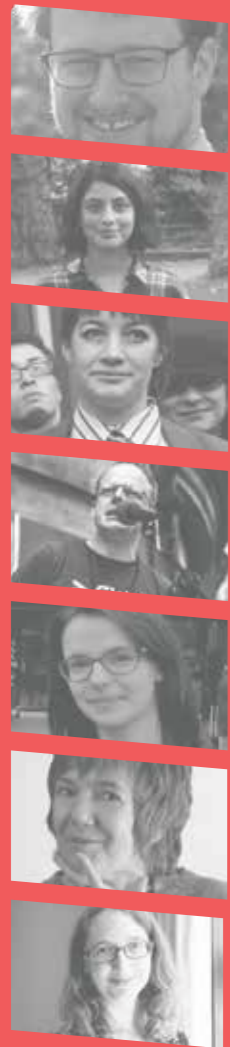
We ran another workshop in London exploring why the nature of political power in the UK has slowed action on the climate crisis, and another in Cardiff doing the same for migrant justice.

After learning a lot from the launch, we decided to pause the campaign as the

snap General Election distracted campaigners' attention away from other issues – but the work invested in this approach is ready to be activated again when the political context changes.







In May, we hosted a series of exciting speakers for our **Democracy Gathering**.

Originally planned as a face-to-face activist gathering and generously supported by the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, we adapted the event to a series of online calls, with over 300 people joining us over the course of a week.

We're grateful to the speakers who joined us, including:

- Adam Ramsay (OpenDemocracy)
- Minnie Rahman, Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants)
- Danni Paffard (Green New Deal UK)
- Nick Dearden (Global Justice Now)
- Ellen Lees (We Own It)
- Hilary Wainwright (Red Pepper)
- Christine Berry (economist and author)

**DEMOCRACY  
GATHERING**  
6 - 7:30 PM / 25-29 MAY

## WHY DEMOCRACY MATTERS

Our **Democracy Gathering** in early summer explored expanding our understanding of democracy. Far more than voting for our rulers every few years, we discussed embedding social and economic rights, bringing democracy into our working lives, and how deeper participation is critical in facing the existential challenges our society faces.

We followed this up with two events billed **Why Democracy Matters** that explored some of our **Democratic Future** principles.

Thorvaldur Gylfason and Valeria Carcomo joined us online to share their stories from some of the most exciting democracy movements in the world. After Iceland's

catastrophic banking collapse, a huge proportion of citizens engaged with drafting a new constitution, but the final document sits on the shelf thanks to fishing interests bankrolling politicians opposed to the radical provisions.

Valeria talked about the enormous movement for a new constitution in Chile, kicked off by teenage metro fare protesters that has forced a conservative government to promise a people-powered process to finally replace Pinochet's constitution.

In our second session, openDemocracy's Peter Geoghegan painted a picture of often internationally-connected millionaire ideologues funding campaigns and parties, setting up think tanks to push agendas at odds with public opinion, and election rules hopelessly weak to prevent this onslaught. Peter said change will only come when thousands more of us protest and make our voices heard.



“

**One thing that should've been done years ago is to cap donations to political parties and really do everything we can to remove money from politics. It's really important that money doesn't speak louder than people in politics, and one of the only ways to do that is to take money out of the equation.**

”



## How has Covid-19 affected British democracy?

*Democracy in lockdown* was our exciting 11-episode podcast series covering the latest news about our democracy in the time of Covid-19.

Every Thursday from April to June, Sam Coates, Trudie Kee and Ana Guzmán Ortiz looked at the UK's political system and explored how the global health crisis has impacted our society and democracy.

With special appearances from Matthew Hull and Sarah Clarke, we made the case for a healthier democracy, delving into insufficient PPE and lack of transparency and accountability, to emergency powers and the Coronavirus Act, to the furlough scheme and migrants' rights.



Episodes featured a variety of expert guests from organisations such as the Network for Police Monitoring (NetPol) and the Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS).

With over 2,250 plays, the podcast helped to track critical moments of the pandemic, and to bring Unlock Democracy's message to a new audience.

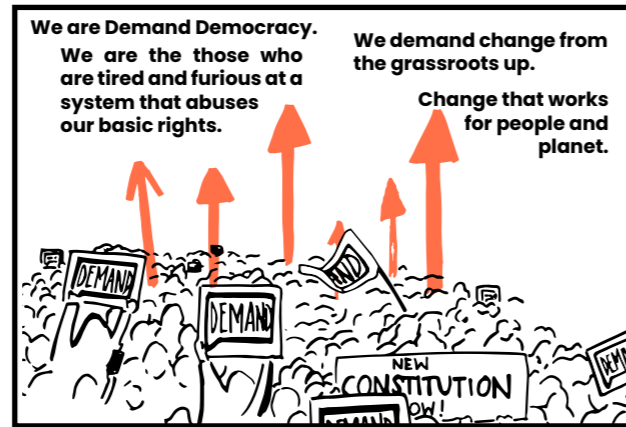
We'd like to thank all the people who participated in this exciting project, including Kevin Blowe from NetPol; Dolores Modern from LAWRS; EJ Fawcett and Oliver

Slaughter from UKSCN; Millie Keara, MYP for Staffordshire; and everyone who shared their stories to make this podcast possible.

Listen online at: [www.unlockdemocracy.org.uk/democracyinlockdown](http://www.unlockdemocracy.org.uk/democracyinlockdown)

# Resources and Publications

This year we've produced some great publications. Our **Demand Democracy** pamphlet featured artwork by Trudie Kee and set out the case for a new constitution and radical democracy.



*the Demand Democracy zine*

More recently, Trudie led on the creation of our Resources Hub, bringing together a range of resources designed to provide an accessible introduction to topics like **What is Democracy?**, **Why Codify a Constitution?** and **Movements that shaped British democracy**.

Read and download the resources at [www.unlockdemocracy.org.uk/resources-hub](http://www.unlockdemocracy.org.uk/resources-hub)

# Brexit Civil Society Alliance

The Brexit Civil Society Alliance is a grant-funded project which Unlock Democracy has hosted since 2017. Their focus is to bring the voice of civil society from across the entire UK to Parliament.

Over summer 2019 the Alliance organised an open letter to the Prime Minister warning of the impacts of no-deal Brexit on civil society, signed by over 100 organisations from across the UK.

Last year the Alliance continued to host round tables across the UK taking policy experts to local organisations. Due to



Covid-19 these became a series of webinars titled Brexit Answers.

The Alliance convenes a working group focusing on the EU Settlement Scheme. It coordinated a letter to the Home Secretary calling for changes to the scheme in light of Covid-19.

Continuing work includes a weekly e:bulletin, updated Campaign Toolkit, and a weekly EU Settlement Scheme monitoring email.

Visit [www.brexitcivilsocietyalliance.org](http://www.brexitcivilsocietyalliance.org) to find out more about the project.



The pandemic has seen a dramatic shrinking of democratic participation – elections have been cancelled, the Coronavirus Act has suspended many of our liberties, and the government has taken a law-and-order-, not community-driven approach to managing lockdown.

We want to meet this threat with a renewed vision for what democracy should mean after the pandemic. Mutual aid networks across these islands have shown all of us can make decisions and work together – it's time to demand a political system where 'elected dictatorship' gives way to mass participation in the decisions shaping our lives.

We recently launched our *Principles for a Democratic Future*, and will be

## *Democratic Futures*

campaigning to spread these ideas while also challenging the government's anti-democratic plans.

- 1. We demand the right to an accountable government that we can effectively scrutinise.**
- 2. We demand the right to decide any big reforms to our political system together, no to politicians doing it on our behalf.**
- 3. We demand the right to exert accountability over those trying to distort our democracy.**
- 4. We demand the right to define what democracy means to us.**
- 5. We must build a political system resilient for the future.**

## *Community Democracy*

Local government is the lifeblood of democracy. For many people, it's where they first become politically active, whether by direct involvement as an employee or councillor or as a single issue activist seeking support for a project in their own community. When local democracy is reduced it denies us all the power to affect our own communities.

Our **Community Democracy** campaign is an attempt to bring the call for democracy to the level of local government, enabling us to work with and alongside all those who work for or who are affected by Local Government.

Led by members of our Council, we aim to highlight the steady erosion of the powers of local government to act in the

best interests of local people, and the widening deficits of democracy caused by centralisation, funding cuts, and privatisation.

We're planning a major academic study on the legislative processes that have removed powers from local government, to identify the democratic deficits which have opened up as a result in areas including social services, housing, and transport.

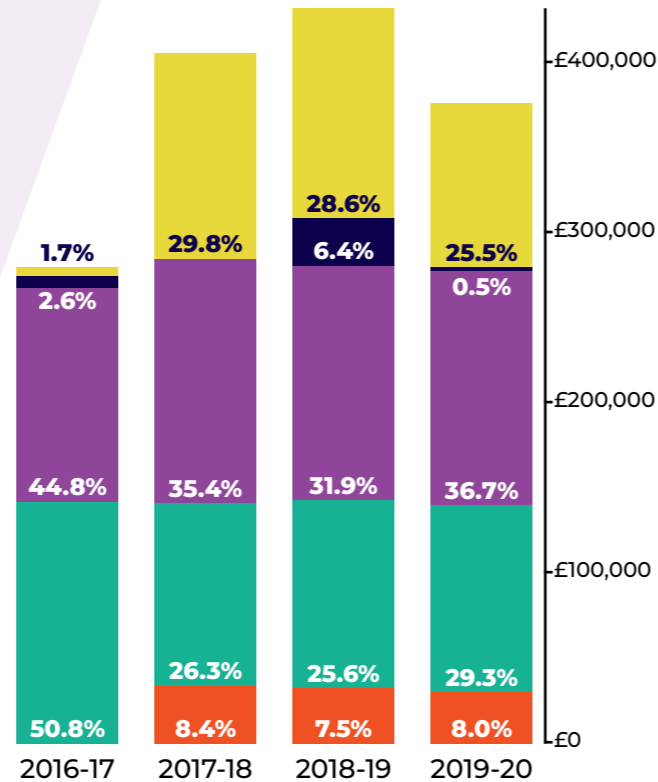
We'll build from there, involving local councils as partners and seeking to establish local democracy groups. We hope the report itself will provide a strong basis for developing well-informed campaigning and educational materials.

# Finances

As always, we are enormously grateful to everyone who has contributed financially to Unlock Democracy. Your membership fees and donations amounted to some £140,000 in the year from April 2019 to March 2020, and are key to keeping us running as an independent voice for democracy.

We are very grateful to the trusts and grant funders who provide support for specific projects. We'd like to thank the **Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust** for supporting the Democracy Gathering, and **The Legal Education Foundation, Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, JMG Foundation,** and **NPC's Transition Advice Fund** for funding the Brexit Civil Society Alliance project.

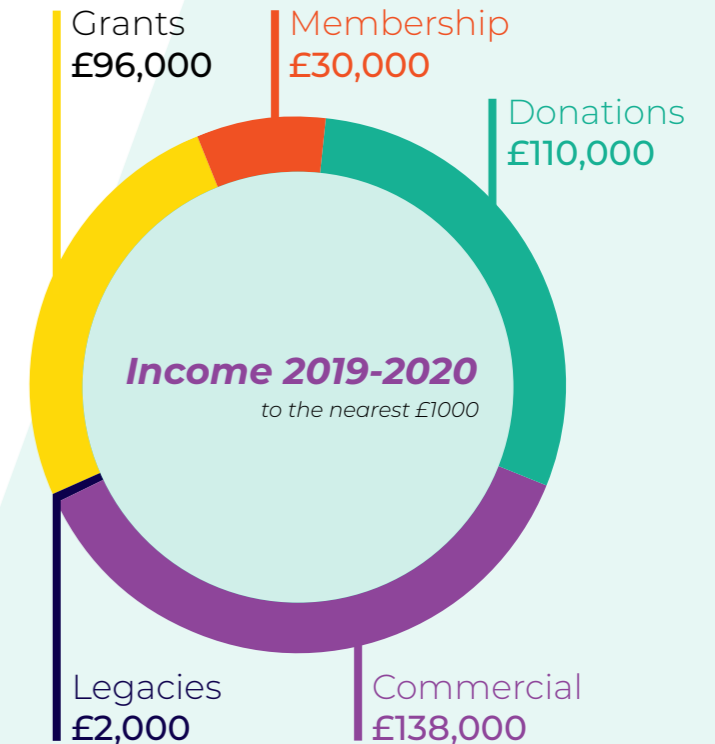
Income 2016-2020



Unlock Democracy is also supported by income from our subsidiary property company, Rodell Properties, to which new members of the Board of Directors were also elected in spring 2020. Rodell owns and manages two properties in central London.

The full audited accounts for Unlock Democracy's financial year 2019-2020 will be available in November 2020 in an independent report by our auditors, Berley Chartered Accountants.

**We would like to sincerely thank everyone who has contributed to Unlock Democracy this year. Whether you've given your time, your funds, or simply your commitment, your dedication is truly appreciated.**





As the world reels from the impact of Covid-19, authoritarian thinking seems to be gaining the upper hand across the world.

Unlock Democracy has been putting forward a radical vision for a change in our broken system, putting people at the heart of politics and protecting our rights with a new constitution for the UK.



**UNLOCK**  
DEMOCRACY