

# 'IT'S OUR TIME' LEARNING FROM WE BELONG'S JOURNEY TO BECOMING AN INDEPENDENT CHARITY

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CHAMPIONING  
VOLUNTARY  
ACTION

**NCVO**

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# 1. Introduction

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## 1.1. About We Belong

Let Us Learn – the project that became We Belong – was founded by Chrisann Jarrett as a project within Just for Kids Law in 2014, after she learnt that she was ineligible for student finance due to her immigration status. The project was conceived as a young migrant-led initiative, to remove barriers to higher education for young migrants. Dami Makinde joined Let Us Learn as its first full-time staff member in November 2015. Initially, Let us Learn's efforts were focused on campaigning for equal access to education. Over time, and with the full involvement of its core group of young migrant activists, its aims grew to encompass wider issues affecting young migrants, including calling for a fairer and more affordable immigration system and challenging damaging Home Office practices. Chrisann was able to access a scholarship to study law in 2014 and rejoined the project as a staff member in 2017.

The project had two strands: providing information to young migrants on their eligibility for student finance and campaigning to remove barriers to access.

The first major victory for the campaign was *R (Tigere) v Secretary of State for Business Innovation and Skills*. Tigere appealed to the Supreme Court, supported by Let Us Learn, on the grounds that the criteria for eligibility for student finance breached her right to education, and the appeal was upheld by a 3:2 majority. This was a turning point for Let Us Learn, with a large number of young people joining the group in the wake of this decision.

Following this, Let Us Learn launched the #YoungGiftedandBlocked campaign, calling on universities to set up scholarships for young migrants with unsettled or insecure immigration status. More than 20 scholarships had been set up at universities across the country by September 2019.

Let Us Learn has worked with over 1,200 young migrants in total. It has a core group of young activists numbering about 20 and has monthly gatherings for a wider group of young migrants. Core group members strongly valued being part of We Belong.

I do get a genuine sense of fulfilment in terms of helping my community and knowing that other people hopefully won't have to go through what I did and what my friends did and [it] just feels nice to give back. Especially when I'm working in a job where it feels like I'm selling people things they don't need or want, this feels like I'm actually helping people. And it's just nice to have a community of people you can talk to about what's actually going on. (*Young activist from We Belong core group*)

I feel comfortable being myself in this space, and I actually feel really inspired by the things that people are doing. You can be in this situation but still achieve. (*Young activist from We Belong core group*)

Let Us Learn worked with other campaigning organisations, including the Coram Children's Legal Centre, to campaign against the rise in immigration fees throughout 2018, particularly in the wake of the Windrush scandal. Their lobbying of government, together with other organisations in the immigration sector, helped ensure that fees for Limited Leave to Remain were frozen for 2019/20.

I think we're doing a great job to put a face to an issue ... I think there was a time when we were just statistics and numbers on a page and that we are the ones now using the narrative in whatever way we can, whether that's through [a] newspaper report or Dami doing the Twitter takeover and sharing a personal story. It's changing the narrative of us just being criminals who have snuck in somehow and want to destabilise the system in some way, and it's like, 'No, we're like young people that are trying to get by.' (*Young activist from We Belong core group*)

Discussions about Let Us Learn becoming an independent charity began formally in 2016. We Belong began operating as an independent charity on 2 September 2019 and officially launched on 3 October. We Belong is the only young migrant-led charity operating in the immigration sector. This report discusses We Belong's journey to independence and the lessons that can be learned from it for other organisations that work with young people and wish to develop youth-led projects.

## 1.2. About the evaluation

This is a simple process evaluation of We Belong's journey to independence. We interviewed the following individuals:

- Carolyn Regan: Chair of Just for Kids Law Trustee Board
- Jennie Fleming: member of both Just For Kids Law Trustee Board and We Belong Trustee Board
- Dami Makinde and Chrisann Jarrett: Co-founders of We Belong, and Joel Carter: Head of Programmes and Participation at Just for Kids Law (group interview)
- Jake Lee: Deputy Director of UK Programme, Unbound Philanthropy
- We Belong core group of young migrant activists, including three Trustees of We Belong.

We reviewed key documents from We Belong, including their business plan, funding application to Unbound Philanthropy and correspondence with the Charity Commission. We also reviewed key documents from Just for Kids Law including minutes of board meetings.

We have not anonymised comments from the named individuals above, but we have anonymised the young migrant activists, including the young Trustees.

## 2. Key findings

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### 2.1. Rationale for We Belong becoming an independent organisation

There was consensus among those working at Just for Kids Law (JFKL) and We Belong that it was 'always part of the plan' for We Belong to eventually become independent. According to Jennie Fleming, who was involved with both trustee boards, Just for Kids Law 'did not want to constrain' projects, particularly those that were more participatory, and were prepared for projects to become independent if they were 'better served by being independent.' Joel Carter acknowledged Just for Kids Law's focus as a charity is not on community organising, saying 'we don't really do organising'. Just for Kids Law had learned a great deal about organising from their association with the Dreamer movement in the USA as they set up Let Us Learn, but staff acknowledged that this aspect of Let us Learn's work was likely to be better served by becoming independent.

Discussions on moving to an independent organisation had begun in 2016, when there had been a review with the co-founder and then co-CEO of Just for Kids Law, Shauneen Lambe. At that stage, they had agreed to have a two-year period remaining part of Just for Kids Law, while developing their capacity, with a further review in the summer of 2018.

Just For Kids Law's support had been invaluable in getting the project started and mentoring Dami and Chrisann to the point where it was viable to consider Let us Learn becoming independent. Both the We Belong co-founders and Just for Kids Law staff recognised that there was increasing tension between the intention for the project to be youth led and the need to fit into the organisational and governance structures of Just for Kids Law. This led to a situation, as Dami Makinde described, where 'behind the scenes the young people weren't the ones making the decisions; everything had to go through Just for Kids Law.' According to Chrisann, some of these tensions may have arisen because Let us Learn was not initially planned out in the same way as other projects had been.

Usually projects at Just for Kids Law are designed and forward planned – I don't think that happened with Let us Learn. It developed organically and with some sort of autonomy, so when things started to get bigger it didn't fit within Just for Kids Law, so we had to take a couple of steps back. (*Chrisann Jarrett, co-CEO of We Belong*)

By this stage, Let Us Learn had already demonstrated the need for young people to fully occupy the space in order to lead change. Initially, the core was facilitated by staff at Just for Kids Law, including Joel Carter. As the core group gained maturity, it was clear that the presence of Just for Kids Law staff created a power dynamic that inhibited young activists. As Dami reported:

They just wouldn't say anything! [...] You could see it in the room that everybody would nod at what was being said by the adults in the room and there was no real power for the young people, so Joel and I had a conversation and it was time for them [the adults] to go.

Everybody started to become so much more involved and started coming more; people started having ideas that we would talk to Just for Kids Law about. Some of them got shut down, which is fine. But it definitely grew and gave young people the power to be free. *(Dami Makinde, co-CEO of We Belong)*

The power dynamic was also evident in the wider immigration sector. While this was not perhaps fully articulated in the early stages of the process, becoming independent gave We Belong an opportunity to rebalance the relationship with other organisations in the immigration sector and to set the agenda. The founders wanted to move away from the tokenism that had characterised their early interactions with the wider sector as the only significant lived-experience-led project. In addition, it was important to them that young people 'occupy the space' where these discussions are taking place so that they can situate their own lived experience within wider systemic issues, thereby becoming better able to lead change. One young migrant talked about their experience of the wider immigration sector:

I'm tired of the White Saviour thing! That's what they like to do in this country. We are the only charity that is led by those with lived experience and not a white person being the face and bringing a young person with them and saying: 'Talk, talk, this is our case study!' The people running it, the people behind everything have lived experiences – we need our voices to be heard and not that of a white person. *(Young activist from We Belong core group)*

There were also more practical considerations at stake. Some funders, notably Unbound Philanthropy, who had funded the Let Us Learn project at Just for Kids Law were only prepared to continue with funding if We Belong became an independent charity. There were greater funding opportunities for We Belong separately from Just for Kids Law. With funding often a key risk for charities, this was an important consideration for Just for Kids Law's Trustee Board.

## 2.2. Assets that supported We Belong on the journey to independence

### Chrisann's and Dami's leadership

According to Jake Lee from Unbound Philanthropy, Dami and Chrisann 'stood out as leaders' from the very early stages of their involvement with Let Us Learn. Over time, they became 'very compelling spokespeople' who, by 2018, were able to be the 'go-to people on the question of youth and migration' and 'support the incoming generation of Let Us Learners and young people with insecure immigration status.'

Their leadership was also recognised by the core group.

What's really amazing about the charity is we have really two great amazing leaders – a lot of the work we do we don't really see it but they let us be involved as much as possible, and they make it seem really natural. They do so much work and they don't do it for the praise. They've done so much work that even other people who know nothing about the charity are benefiting and we don't shout, 'That was us.'*(Young activist from We Belong core group)*

## Mentoring and skill development

By the time that We Belong had begun the journey to independence, its co-founders had received considerable support from Just for Kids Law and some of their funders. They had undertaken a secondment at the Greater London Authority, which had developed their professional skills. They had also, funded by Unbound Philanthropy, the Social Change Initiative (SCI) and donations, been involved in exchange visits to the USA to get to know the Dreamer movement and hosted reciprocal visits from key members of that movement. In addition, they had received mentoring from key staff at Just for Kids Law including Shauneen Lambe, co-founder and co-CEO until February 2018 and Joel Carter, Head of Programmes and Participation, as well as Fiona Bawdon, a communications consultant. This had supported them to build their leadership skills and ability to manage a project. This put them in a strong position to move into the role of co-CEOs. In the 18 months running up to We Belong becoming independent there was a particularly intense period of support and guidance about charity operations, fundraising, finance and governance, provided by Just for Kids Law's Director of Finance and Resources, Julie Bentley and the current CEO, Enver Solomon, based around development areas that Dami and Chrisann had identified.

The Just For Kids Law Trustee Board took a decision to consider supporting We Belong with cash flow challenges if the need were to arise once they were independent.. A member of the Just For Kids Law Trustee Board and Joel Carter, Head of Programmes and Participation are both on the We Belong Trustee Board. This provides a link back to Just For Kids Law as well as ongoing support from individuals who know the history of the organisation. There is also continued informal support from key staff at Just For Kids Law, including the CEO and Director of Finance and Resources who have committed to holding regular meetings with Dami and Chrisann.

## Commitment from key funders

The most important catalyst for We Belong becoming independent was commitment from key funders, notably Unbound Philanthropy. According to Dami, Chrisann and Joel, it was a meeting with Unbound Philanthropy that changed the conversation from 'we'll review it but there will be loads of steps in between' to 'boom, it's going to happen,' as Dami put it. Unbound committed funding both to Let Us Learn as a project within JFKL and to We Belong for a two-year period as an independent organisation.

Unbound gave a larger than average grant because, as Jake Lee stated:

We thought there was potential in the work that they do. It was a really good strategic fit for us, but also they and their board reflect more lived experience than we would see in the sector. We wanted to be clearly supporting their efforts during the start-up phase of the new organisation, which is always a challenging period. Securing funding at that stage is one of the most difficult hurdles to overcome. *(Jake Lee, Unbound Philanthropy)*

The support from funders enabled Dami and Chrisann to focus on strategy and on setting up the new organisation, as well as to commit time to their own development and learning without needing to spend extensive time 'hunting money.'

It was crucial that funding would not have been forthcoming if Let Us Learn had remained a project within Just for Kids Law. This created a sense of urgency in launching We Belong as an independent charity, that perhaps would not have been there if funders had committed continuation funding to Let Us Learn within Just for Kids Law.

This commitment extended beyond just providing funding. In addition to the mentoring and the exchange and secondment opportunities, Unbound also provided a business consultant and a fundraising consultant to support Chrisann and Dami with the process of developing a new organisation. Unbound and Paul Hamlyn Foundation provided opportunities for Let Us Learn, as it was then, and later the fledgling We Belong, to meet with other potential funders and organisations in the immigration space, understanding that securing funding and networking were key to its continued viability. The commitment from funders to the new organisation provided We Belong with crucial financial security in the early period, when charities are especially vulnerable.

### **Rigorous challenge – as well as support – from Just for Kids Law Trustees**

Let Us Learn initially presented their proposals to the Board in 2018. Just For Kids Law then formed a sub-group of their finance and risk committee to scrutinise the progress of We Belong becoming independent. The decision to become independent was finalised at a meeting of Just For Kids Law's Trustee Board in June 2019.

The relationship between Let Us Learn and Just for Kids Law was not always easy during the process of becoming independent. Despite this, before the Trustee Board meeting, Dami and Chrisann met key members of the Trustee Board individually. They both agreed that the rigorous challenge, especially from Trustees, helped them to refine their ideas and strengthened We Belong as an organisation.

Their [the Trustees] questioning us meant that we knew what we had to prepare; we really went through that rigorously. Had we not done that I don't know what would have happened. (*Dami Makinde, co-CEO of We Belong*)

Presenting to the Just for Kids Law Trustee Board also helped Dami and Chrisann to understand the workings of governance and prepared them for how We Belong's Trustee Board would work.

Especially with our Board now, having to relay information to them and giving reasons as to why we think 'B' should be the course of action as opposed to 'A'. It [presenting to Just for Kids Law Trustees] really did refine that, and gave us confidence that we knew what we were doing. (*Chrisann Jarrett, co-CEO of We Belong*)

Meeting Dami and Chrisann before the presentation also gave Trustees confidence that We Belong would be a viable organisation. At the initial presentation, the Trustees were unanimously in favour of supporting Let Us Learn to move towards independence; this was partly a result of being able to ask questions of Dami and Chrisann ahead of the meeting.

The rigorous process involved in presenting to the Board also supported We Belong's co-founders in developing their business plan and pitching to funders.

Some of the questions asked by the Board were also asked by funders, and knowing what we had to say to funders was really helpful. As we became We Belong, it was helpful to understand why we were doing what we were doing. *(Chrisann Jarett, co-CEO of We Belong)*

## **Young migrants fully involved in shaping We Belong's strategy**

Let Us Learn's group of young activists were fully involved in the choice to be an independent organisation and in discussing strategic choices in the core group; as one of them put it, 'We all collectively thought "it's our time".' As the organisation began to move towards independence, they held a core group away day, facilitated by a consultant funded by Unbound Philanthropy.

During the away day in 2017, the group explored 'what we wanted the organisation to look like, and how we can start that up now in terms of structure.' At this point, they also discussed their next steps in terms of campaigning, having secured the supreme court victory and the scholarships. Collectively, they developed an understanding that the root cause of the problems they were facing was the immigration system and they decided that this was what they wanted to tackle.

I remember us having a meeting and discussing 'What now?' because we've done the scholarship, we've done the case and we voted and ranked what we wanted, and immigration was mostly top for everyone. Then they started the campaign 'Chasing Status' and then it was like: 'Wow, this could be much bigger.' *(Young activist from We Belong core group)*

Lots of people felt like the race was finished and done with – we'd won the Tigere case, we'd won lots of scholarships –so people were wondering what we were doing now, what do we stand for and that's what pushed us to look at immigration. Because if people are coming and there's nothing to do, why do they stay? So that's what it felt like at that time. *(Young activist from We Belong core group)*

When we were deciding what to do and people were saying immigration is the problem, it was such a lightbulb moment for me because it was like, 'Of course, it's all the rules on immigration that cause all the problems.' *(Young activist from We Belong core group)*

This was not an easy decision, and many of the group found it much more difficult to talk about and engage with than their previous campaigns about access to education.

I think it was not easy to talk to MPs about ... talking about immigration and your family and all that stuff is difficult for people to do. Maybe people just weren't comfortable dealing with that, and it was also such a long process. *(Young activist from We Belong core group)*

It was important to the core group that they were involved in decision-making and that this was part of the integrity of the organisation.

And I think that's what the away day was for – what we wanted the organisation to look like and how can we start that up now in terms of structure. For the most part in terms of the important stuff, the stuff that means most to us, like the big choices that happens, we've always been involved. And that's a big part of Let us Learn/We Belong. One of the things we're proudest of is that we are young people with lived experience and, for us to be able to shout about that, it can't just be the people that work on it that make the decisions, which is why the core group is here – so we can be in those decisions and we can consciously say that we are youth led and lived-experience led. *(Young activist from We Belong core group)*

There was a conscious decision to have three young Trustees from the core group on We Belong's Trustee Board, alongside other individuals with particular expertise. The young Trustees spoke about their experience so far of being part of the Board.

But it's also good to feel like you have an input in the path of the organisation – not only looking at the things that we do and whether that's going to be progressive to us, you also have to look at structural things: staff, strategy, finances, funding, and it makes you more responsible as a person and there's so much going on that we have to keep an eye out for. *(Young activist from We Belong core group, also a young Trustee)*

It feels like everyone has a say, all the other Trustee members understand that We Belong are still lived-experience led, youth led. We want that up to the Board level and, if they didn't understand that, they wouldn't be part of the Board. *(Young activist from We Belong core group, also a young Trustee)*

## 2.3. Challenges on the journey to independence

### Initial lack of clarity on the decision-making process

As Dami, Chrisann and Joel remember it, it had not been clearly explained to Dami and Chrisann that the process of becoming independent would require the Trustee Board's approval, nor had the Trustee Board been kept informed of the discussions taking place among Just For Kids Law senior staff about Let Us Learn becoming independent. It was frustrating for them to realise, having assumed that approval was in place, that there was to be what was from Dami and Chrisann's perspective a lengthy and bureaucratic process before they could become independent.

A change of CEO at Just for Kids Law at the same time added to the lack of clarity and it took some time before there was a clear process set out. The new CEO was keen to support Let Us Learn in becoming independent, but the lack of clarity compounded by the change in CEO leadership was frustrating to Dami and Chrisann and to some of the funders.

We assumed that the process had already been done. So when that process was told to us that no, it hadn't been done, that was a shock to our system. We were now starting to understand that this would take longer than we had possibly

imagined, because it wasn't just a month thing, it was going to take quite a while. *(Dami Makinde, Co-CEO of We Belong)*

I think several people in the network that we operate in [as funders] expressed some frustration ... It was just a bit unclear and it took a while to work out what the right process would be ... [Just For Kids Law] could have listened better during that part of the process. *(Jake Lee, Unbound Philanthropy)*

At that stage, Dami and Chrisann were not familiar with how governance operates.

Because of the side of the fence that we were on as staff, we didn't interact with the Board in general, but that [presenting to the Trustee Board] taught us the structures – that if you are going to register with the Charity Commission there's a set process and you are legally obliged to consult with the right people. *(Chrisann Jarrett, co-CEO of We Belong)*

Despite these challenges and frustrations, the rigour with which the process was carried out was helpful in building the strength of We Belong as an organisation and ensuring good governance in decision making was carried out by Just for Kids Law.

## **Tensions with Just for Kids Law**

The process of becoming independent also raised tensions between the We Belong co-founders and Just for Kids Law staff and trustees. Previously close relationships were tested as the process of becoming independent took longer than was initially expected and trustees scrutinised and questioned specific issues of We Belong's planned governance, finance and organisation. The Trustee Board were fulfilling their function of scrutinising decisions made and rightly had queries about whether We Belong was ready. However, this sometimes put Just for Kids Law staff members in the difficult position of being the bearer of bad news.

It was sometimes unclear who was responsible for moving particular items forward or signing them off. This in turn led to issues of trust.

We just didn't know who was doing what. It was so painful. Joel mentioned trust issues: we didn't know who we could turn to and speak to about certain things. We weren't sure whether the responsibility for some things was with us or with Just for Kids Law. *(Dami Makinde, co-CEO of We Belong)*

This was also difficult for Just for Kids Law staff and Trustees, who clearly wanted to see We Belong become independent and succeed.

It wasn't that we wanted to stop them, we just wanted to make sure they succeed. *(Carolyn Regan, Chair of Just For Kids Law Trustee Board)*

In order to be reassured that We Belong would be viable, Trustees had to be clear about what still needed to be done. When there was clarity, this helped to resolve the trust issues. After the first queries from the Charity Commission following the application for We Belong to be registered as a charity, it was also important for the CEO of Just for Kids Law, Enver Solomon, to provide more

direct support to Dami and Chrisann through the process and keep the board informed of progress and milestones being reached.

## Securing charity status

We Belong's application to the Charity Commission took eight months to be approved. The Charity Commission asked for a number of clarifications: on the organisation's charitable purposes, campaigning, safeguarding, the selection of Trustees and the employment of the co-founders. Responding to these questions took up significant time and effort on the part of We Belong trustees, Dami and Chrisann, and the Just For Kids Law staff and trustees supporting them. Two full responses were to be submitted – one in February 2019 and one in May 2019, with the application finally approved in July 2019.

This was a particularly stressful period for all involved, not just because of the time it took, but because We Belong might not become independent if the Charity Commission rejected the application. Funders also held back on providing funding until the Charity Commission decision was finalised.

The application process highlighted the lack of clarity in the process. A business consultant, funded by Unbound Philanthropy, had been working with Dami and Chrisann to develop the initial application but it could be argued that Just for Kids Law staff and Trustees did not scrutinise the initial application as effectively as they might have done.

*When you look at the things they [the Charity Commission] picked up on, we should have done a better job of picking up some of those mistakes [ourselves].  
(Joel Carter, Director of Programmes and Participation, Just for Kids Law)*

Following the Charity Commission's initial response, the CEO of Just for Kids Law, Enver Solomon and the Trustees on the sub-group also became more involved. Enver was able to feed in his expertise in charity governance and setting up new charities, which proved extremely useful in developing the follow-up response. The Charity Commission accepted the follow up response.

## Managing the practicalities of setting up a new organisation

Setting up a new organisation is a detailed and bureaucratic process, and Dami and Chrisann were new to the task. Moving from a project where back office functions were provided to a new organisation, where they had to organise office space, HR, finance, fundraising and governance, was a challenge and required rapid skill development. The nature of the process also meant that the core group were less able to be involved than perhaps they would have liked.

*There was a lot of bureaucratic work and form filling and that's what it took and I don't know if we would have been allowed to fill those forms. (Young activist from We Belong's core group)*

Dami and Chrisann received support from the Just for Kids Law trustee board, CEO, Director of Finance and Resources and also a skilled freelance administrator dedicated to assist with all the

tasks for organisational set up as well as there initially being some input from a business consultant funded by Unbound Philanthropy.

While the delays were frustrating, they provided space to think through the operational side of setting up a new organisation more carefully and also enabled Dami and Chrisann to acquire more skills and knowledge.

### **Lack of capacity to manage day-to-day work**

As a small project with two full-time staff, the work of setting up We Belong took up a significant proportion of staff time. This meant that the day-to-day work of the project had to be deprioritised during the move to independence. Let Us Learn were able to maintain their campaigning work, and released a major campaigning report entitled 'Normality is a Luxury' in July 2019. However, they were not able to maintain momentum in their engagement work with young people.

Our focus and priority had to be setting up the organisation. The engagement side of the work suffered, and we saw it made a massive impact on the organisation. We're practically starting again from the very beginning [in terms of engagement]. *(Dami Makinde, co-CEO of We Belong)*

## **2.4. Summary of key findings**

- The leadership qualities of the two prospective CEOs were a vital asset. They needed mentoring, support and structured development opportunities to gain the full range of skills they would need to start up a new organisation. Just for Kids Law invested heavily in Chrisann and Dami to ensure that they were in the best possible position to launch We Belong.
- There was a clear intention from the beginning for We Belong to become independent. This meant that decisions made, for example about Chrisann and Dami's development, were made partly with this in mind.
- Starting up a new organisation is a lengthy and bureaucratic process. The rigorous challenge from Trustees was important to make sure that We Belong was in the best possible position to launch – both strategically and operationally. However, there was a lack of clarity in some decision-making processes, and this caused some avoidable frustrations.
- Commitment from funders to the new organisation was crucial in ensuring that We Belong would be viable. The external consultancy support provided by funders was also helpful in making sure that We Belong was viable.
- It was important to involve the young activists in strategic decision-making and particularly in the new Trustee Board. The composition of the new Board had to be finely balanced between being user-led and having sufficient expertise to support the new organisation.

### 3. Key learnings

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This section summarises key learnings drawn from the above findings.

#### 3.1. For projects looking to become independent

##### Start with why

Being clear about the reason why We Belong needed to become independent was key to being able to sustain momentum through the twists and turns of the process. When the process was difficult and setbacks arose, a clear sense of purpose helped all parties sustain motivation to continue to work for We Belong's independence. In this case, it was also clearly important to the young activists that We Belong did become independent.

I would probably ask them to make sure whatever they're doing is worth fighting for. *(Young activist from We Belong's core group)*

Be really committed because it's a lot of work. You will need really strong leadership to push it forward. *(Young activist from We Belong's core group)*

##### Make use of advice, support and mentoring

The advice, support and mentoring from both Just for Kids Law and outside consultants was essential to the eventual success of We Belong. Despite the trust issues that did emerge for a while, there are ongoing good relationships. It is important that the support and mentoring is ongoing even though We Belong is now independent.

Don't think that you know it all because you really don't. Really be honest about what the gaps are and ways in which they can support you because everyone wants to be involved in a success story. *(Chrisann Jarrett, co-CEO of We Belong)*

The co-CEO model creates specific needs for support and mentoring – Chrisann and Dami are receiving coaching support to develop their leadership skills and mutual understanding as co-leaders.

##### Be prepared for bumps in the road

The process was much more emotionally challenging than the co-CEOs expected, and they were emphatic that organisations need to manage the emotional implications of the process.

Be prepared for the emotional side of things – it will mess you up. *(Dami Makinde, co-CEO of We Belong)*

The amount of bumps in the road – it's difficult, it's not easy and sometimes you doubt yourself. They should just be prepared for the worst, expect the best but be prepared for the worst, and know that leadership is hard, not everyone is going to be for you. Not everyone is going to get where you're going, but also

you're going to have some supporters. *(Young activist from We Belong core group)*

The 'bumps in the road' can also be a learning experience, especially as staff prepare to take on a wider range of responsibilities.

If you are up against a wall, how are you using that time for learning so that you can not just make yourself better but also serve the organisation better?  
*(Chrisann Jarrett, co-CEO of We Belong)*

### **Prepare extensively**

Meeting with trustees before the Board meeting, preparing the business plan and business case and ensuring that there were responses to potential questions put Let Us Learn in a strong position with both trustees and funders.

## **3.2. For 'host organisations' supporting projects**

### **Be clear throughout the process**

Greater clarity about the decision-making process would have mitigated the tensions and trust issues that crept in despite the strong and enduring relationships between Just for Kids Law and We Belong.

It was also important to be clear at each stage of the process about what was needed for the organisation to be viable.

The key is to keep everyone up to speed with what the issues are and to be very clear about what you're waiting for, for example saying, 'We're not going ahead yet because A, B and C are still outstanding.' *(Carolyn Regan, Chair of Just for Kids Law Trustee Board)*

### **Support staff to develop the full range of skills**

It was essential to make sure that the co-CEOs were prepared for the full range of responsibilities that come with being a CEO of an organisation rather than a project within an organisation, including HR, finance and, particularly, governance. Most project staff have little experience of working with Trustee Boards, so this is an essential aspect of leadership development.

Not all of such support needs to come directly from the host organisation. External consultancy support can be extremely helpful and avoid potential conflicts of interest.

### **Be prepared to commit time and resource**

Just for Kids Law committed considerable time and resource particularly from senior staff to ensure that We Belong launched on a good footing. The amount of investment it takes particularly to develop governance and 'back office' planning for a new organisation should not be

underestimated. Both sides also needed to be committed to having difficult, honest conversations when necessary.

### **Have an ongoing support plan**

It is important to consider what the relationship between the two organisations will be once the new organisation has formed and to make sure that there are both formal and informal lines of support. Having a 'link trustee' was considered to be extremely useful by both Just for Kids Law and We Belong.

## **3.3. For funders**

### **Build relationships with potential leaders**

Building relationships of mutual trust between the funders, particularly Unbound Philanthropy, and the co-CEOs meant that when there were delays and difficulties they could have an honest conversation and work towards an acceptable solution. This could only be done because the funder had made a long-term commitment and the long-term commitment only came about because of the long-standing relationship.

### **Consider funding consultancy support**

Funding consultancy support, based on the needs of the project, and including business development and fundraising, can 'help to lay the groundwork for grant funding,' as Jake Lee from Unbound Philanthropy noted. Funders that may not wish to commit grant funding at an early stage may consider funding consultancy support with a view to grant funding at a later stage.

### **Work in partnership with other funders**

Funders worked in partnership to share resources and expertise and ensure that We Belong started on a secure footing. They were able to commit different types of resource and also link in to wider networks by collaborating, compared to what any one funder could have leveraged on their own. Collaboration among funders therefore benefits the organisations that they fund.

## Afterword

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It takes a lot of courage for organisations to let a project go. The journey we have been on with Just for Kids Law is testament that the courage comes easy once time and resources are set aside to invest in the project leaders, and ensuring that the correct structures are in place to increase the likelihood of success once the project spins off.

Throughout this two year process of learning and refining the initial prototype for We Belong we have benefited from various stakeholders in the sector who have championed our work and most importantly gained the confidence of funders who are willing to meet us at our point of need. The role of visionary funders should not be understated in the UK's migration sector, we hope that our journey will inspire other funders to be proactive and tactically seek opportunities to invest in young leaders whose dynamism can contribute to the overall vision for a more human immigration system.



Chrisann Jarrett

Co-founders and co-CEOs of We Belong

Dami Makinde

**One of the things we're proudest of is that we are young people with lived experience and, for us to be able to shout about that, it can't just be the people that work on it that make the decisions, which is why the core group is here – so we can be in those decisions and we can consciously say that we are youth led and lived-experience led.**

*Young activist from We Belong core group*

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