

# Future thinking: exploring a liberated future for migrants

# Introduction

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Over the course of the past year, the migration team at Paul Hamlyn Foundation has engaged in a series of activities to help inform a new vision, priorities, and criteria for the Migration Fund. They also wanted to understand how the Foundation can meet its ambitions to become a more transparent, accountable, and anti-racist funder. These activities have included research into various successful change initiatives, and visits to grantees, activists, and funders in the migration and intersecting fields in the UK, United States and continental Europe. For the first time, this included a series of collaborative visioning and planning workshops with organisations working in the migration field:

- in London and the South-East (held in London in July 2023)
- in Scotland (held in Edinburgh in September 2023)
- in the North of England (held in Manchester in December 2023)
- in Northern Ireland (held in Belfast in January 2024).

The purpose of these collaborative workshops, specifically, was to:

- create space for participants to step away from their daily work and imagine what a better future for migrants might look like
- explore what steps can be taken in the next few years to move closer to this vision
- support participants to network and draw strength and solidarity from each other, and
- for PHF to learn more about how to run events of this type that feel enjoyable, worthwhile, and mutually beneficial.

A mix of people were invited to the workshops, including some whose organisations were already funded by PHF, and others who the team had heard about in other ways (including from other participants and funder partners). In total, across the four workshops, 70 people took part. Participants were invited to draw on their full lived and learned experience as individuals, not just as representatives of their current organisation. Members of PHF's migration, evidence and learning, policy, communications, and senior leadership teams also attended different workshops. They were joined, at different workshops, by funder colleagues from: AB Charitable Trust, The Robertson Trust, Justice Together Initiative, The Blue Thread and Indigo Trust.

The workshops were co-designed by the PHF team and their learning partners, who facilitated the sessions. The Manchester, Edinburgh, and Belfast workshops were extended to a full day, following feedback from those taking part in the London session that more time would have been beneficial. Other tweaks were made to the agenda

as the team learned more about what worked and what didn't. The Belfast workshop included an initial session exploring the Northern Irish context, as the PHF team were less familiar with this and found it important to support their funding in the region.

Headline findings from the four workshops are set out below. Across the workshops there was quite a bit of consensus, but some important differences of opinion were expressed too, reflecting participants' different work and roles, personal experiences and politics, and operating contexts, among other things. While this note does not attempt to capture all of this important nuance, these points of commonality and difference have been noted by the team and to ensure this is not lost.

Findings from the workshops, and the other consultation activities, informed a new draft vision, priorities, and criteria for the Migration Fund. These were discussed at a fifth collaborative session held in London in February 2024, attended by a mix of people, some of whom had attended one of the four previous sessions, and some whom had not. Participants provided feedback and suggestions which are currently being incorporated by PHF ahead of the launch of the Fund's next iteration.

# Thinking about the future

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As part of the sessions, the facilitators asked participants:

- What gets in the way of them thinking about the future
- What helps thinking long-term, and
- How funders can support them in this.

Some of the themes that emerged in discussions are set out on this page and the next. More long-term, secure, and no strings attached funding, greater equity in funding across the sector and movement and the UK, simpler and more transparent funder processes, and more opportunities to think and plan together came up numerous times across the workshops.

“What gives me hope for the future? Minoritised people using their own voices – being empowered, platformed, ‘at the table.’”

“It’s difficult to think about the future when the present is so grim.”

“What helps? Regularity of convening, time away from the day to day, connection.”

## ***What gets in the way?***

- The harsh current reality, hostile environment, Home Office, rise of the Far Right
- Constant change and uncertainty
- Communities focused on survival
- Everything feels urgent and focus on fire-fighting
- Stretched capacity, lack of long-term resources
- Sense that it’s a privilege to think about the future
- Burnout, poor health
- Fear of change and/or apathy
- Loud voices that don’t want change
- Siloed working, lack of collaboration and joint planning
- Competition for resources, space and across different narratives
- Inequality and uncertainty in funding
- Large organisations and funders expecting migrants to work and share their knowledge for free
- Funders not understanding local contexts
- Too much focus on consensus
- Unwillingness to embrace anti-oppressive practice.

## ***What helps?***

- Trusting communities to shape their own futures
- Stability and resources
- Our own basic needs being met
- Building on previous experiences of change as an individual and society
- Having time and space to think
- Better networked organisations, regular convening, more trust between organisations
- Thinking more interconnectedly across issues, geographies, etc.
- Centring those with lived experience
- Talking to young people
- Intergenerational sharing and learning
- Learning from other people's experiences and from good practice
- Better quality research
- Celebrating successes however small
- Leadership within the movement not just within organisations
- Learning to handle conflict and talk to those we disagree with within and outside the movement
- More engagement with other movements
- More imagination and questioning of the status quo.

## ***How can funders help?***

- More funding, longer-term funding 5+ years, core and unrestricted funding
- More funding for grassroots groups, groups led by people with lived experience of migration, groups outside of city centres
- Distributing funds equally across UK
- Funding for organisational stability and providing 'grants plus' support
- Funding collaborative work and collective leadership
- Funding to challenge systems that intersect across issues and geographies
- Retaining some reactive funding while funding systemic change
- Closer engagement with the sector, more relational working, listening to and trusting grantees
- Understanding local contexts
- Better communication of opportunities, support to navigate the funding world and meet other funders
- Easier application and reporting processes; more feedback
- Dismantling funding structures that reproduce harm
- Building and funding a diverse and well-connected sector
- More convening, helping people to learn and plan together
- More actively encouraging anti-oppressive practice
- Having people with lived experience in funder teams and on funder boards
- Being more open and vocal about their politics
- Thinking longer-term, being more constant (not "flip-flopping").

# Visions of the future

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Participants at all four sessions worked together in groups to explore what a liberated future for migrants might look and feel like. After first discussing this, they were invited to depict their vision in any way they wanted, making use of the creative materials provided. Some of the visual depictions participants produced are set out below.

Across the workshops, some common elements of a liberated future for migrants emerged, including being:

- free from all forms of intersecting oppression
- met without presumptions or assumptions being made about you
- able to be yourself and express your own identity without fear
- free from labels and categorisation based on legal status, notions of being deserving or undeserving
- treated equally
- free to make choices, work, learn, and pursue what you love
- able to participate in wider decision-making in society and able to enjoy community, solidarity and support.

While for some participants “a fair and just migration system for all’ was part of their vision, most envisioned a world in which migrants were free to move and to stay without borders or restrictions.

In all of the workshops, **participants reflected that a liberated future for migrants would actually be a liberated future for everyone.** They also noted that liberation begins in one’s own heart and mind, which means that psychological support and political education are both crucial. Some participants felt strongly that any future vision needs to be global in its scope, as migration is a global phenomenon and migrants experience interconnected, transnational systems of oppression. Others highlighted the need to focus on the natural world, not just on human beings: “We need to decentre human beings in our vision of liberation”.

The actual term ‘liberation’ resonated with most participants (“liberation goes beyond opportunities and choice – it’s about being free from oppression”), however a few felt it was jargon, and a few cautioned that it has particular resonance in some parts of the world and the UK that need to be properly understood. A few participants felt it was important to have a better analysis of the present situation, including how power operates within it, before we can talk productively about the future.



Some of the depictions of a liberated future for migrants from the workshops.

“A liberated future for migrants is a liberated future for all.”

“Liberation is having a sense of dignity and self-worth, with the resources to do well for yourself, to define your own future.”

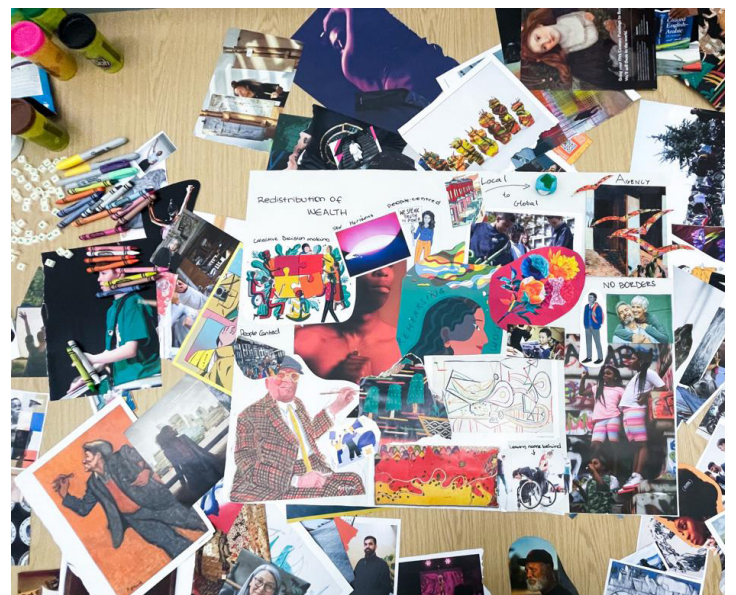
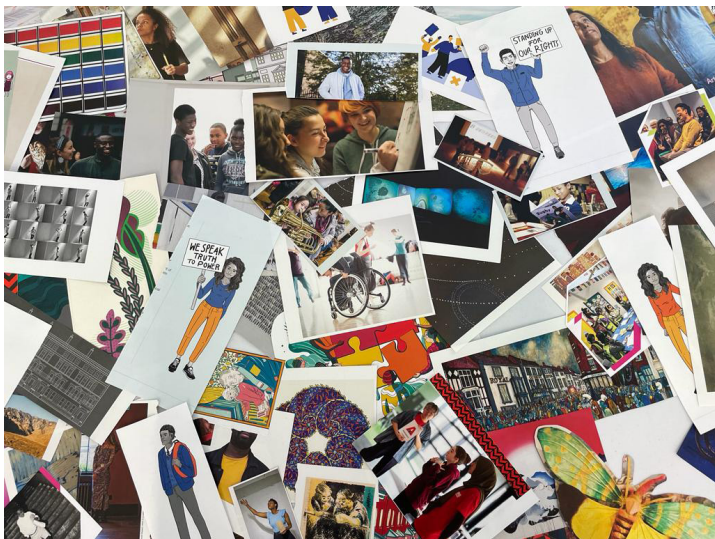
“Liberation is being able to make mistakes, knowing you are held by your community.”

“An important part of the future is that it's co-created, not delivered to us. The process of developing it is important.”

“Being liberated means not being forced to walk in shoes that have been given to me, even if they don't fit me.”

“It's made me think about my personal vision for my own life. To liberate things for others you need to take care of yourself.”

“Liberation is a powerful word, it has an embodied feeling, it denotes freedom from incarceration, slavery, draconian laws.”



# Opportunities over the next 3-5 years

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After developing their visions for the future, participants worked together to try to identify some opportunities to move closer to those visions over the next 3-5 years in their local area, region, nation, or across the UK. They were also asked to identify gaps and challenges to address, tensions to manage, and what funders could do to help.

One of the strongest messages from this session was the importance of understanding the local context for action, especially for funders.

Participants in Scotland, for example, generally expressed greater hopefulness about policy influencing work than colleagues in other parts of the UK, with room to build on the “levers of devolved competence”, though there was still much uncertainty about how the forthcoming UK election may shape Scottish politics. Making better use of devolved powers was also a key theme in Manchester.

The workshop in Northern Ireland was held just before Stormont returned, so opportunities for policy influencing felt particularly uncertain. However, participants suggested organisations working for migrant justice there had access to some unique human rights tools set out in Article 2. They also face some unique challenges in a post-conflict society where “internal divisions make it difficult for migrants to be visible as part of the community”.

Across the workshops, participants noted the importance of having diverse approaches to change that were better connected to each other. However, they particularly emphasised the importance of:

- building power in communities and workplaces
- ongoing political education and efforts to get the vote out
- working intersectionality and connecting across issues, sectors, regions, and nations
- bringing in new allies and targeting new actors, with businesses identified as both a potential ally and an important target for challenge

“The return of devolved power in Stormont create opportunities for advocacy around immigration.”  
(Participant at Belfast workshop)

“Devolution and being in control of local and regional narratives bring opportunities.”  
(Participant at Manchester workshop)

“Pulling the levers of devolved competence – transport, education, health, justice, community care.” (Participant at Edinburgh workshop)

“Connecting with business leaders – unusual voices.”  
(Participant at London workshop)



- promoting the leadership of people with lived experience of migration, and
- tapping into young people's energy and activism.

Participants also emphasised the importance of building solidarity and joyfulness in the movement, including using arts and creativity, to help sustain members for what is likely to be a long struggle.

Participants in Scotland and Northern Ireland emphasised that opportunities for positive change will come from better linking of migrant justice activity across the nations of the UK. Across all four workshops, participants identified a need to balance some key tensions, including those between:

- reactive and proactive work
- work focused on the immediate term and the long-term
- insider and outsider strategies for influence
- different views of the world and of change within the movement, including reformist and abolitionist approaches
- a desire to dismantle borders while retaining a sense of belonging, and
- the need to build the base while learning how to talk to and work better with (some of) those we disagree with.

A few of the opportunities highlighted by participants are set out on the next page. It wasn't always easy for participants to identify concrete opportunities, given such uncertainty about what the next few years may bring and people's different roles and work not all of which afforded them the opportunity to think often and widely about this. There was more time to discuss these issues in the Edinburgh, Manchester, and Belfast workshops as these were held over a full day.

### ***Manchester workshop opportunities***

- Devolution, Mayoral engagement (Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire)
- Elections (local and national political engagement)
- Regional Asylum and Migration Strategy
- City of Sanctuary campaign (Greater Manchester)
- Organising young people
- Movement-building focused on the grassroots
- Targeting corporations that uphold the “border system”
- Building more cross-sectoral partnerships.

### ***Edinburgh workshop opportunities***

- New independence referendum?
- Dynamic between a new Labour government and the Scottish National Party
- Cross-party group on migration
- Pulling levers of devolved competence (transport, education, health, justice, community care)
- Changing demographics in Scotland and attitudes becoming more welcoming of migrants
- Public standing up against far-right and immigration enforcement activities
- Mobilising migrants to vote, political education.

### ***Belfast workshop opportunities***

- Return to devolved power sharing in Stormont
- Unique human rights tools in Northern Ireland (Article 2)
- Unique post conflict society (conflict as a shared experience)
- Legal aid provision in Northern Ireland
- Constitutional referendum
- Engagement between UK-EU/ UK-Ireland
- Voter registration
- Promoting educational and cultural integration
- Strong civil society collaboration
- Kind Economy Network
- Linking with new allies / partners, including community groups and businesses.

### ***London workshop opportunities***

- Activity in workplaces, organised labour
- Targeting business practice that uphold harmful systems
- Coalitions with unusual actors, incl. businesses
- Connecting with public figures, encouraging them to speak up
- Lords trying to change the narrative on migration in Parliament
- Church leaders raising awareness of harmful policies and pushing for change
- Invigorate democratic action, resist apathy
- Journalism and investigative work
- Connect local people to communities beyond our work
- Harness power of arts and culture.

# Feedback on the sessions

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As this was the first time that the migration team at PHF has embarked on a collaborative planning process of this kind, the team was particularly keen to learn about what worked and what could be done better in future. The PHF team and facilitators invited feedback at the end of each workshop and also gave participants the chance to fill in an anonymous survey (which was completed by fourteen people).

Feedback on the workshops was generally very positive. Participants said they particularly valued the opportunity to take time out of their everyday work to focus on the future, and to spend time with a diverse group of colleagues from across the sector (including funders) and find out more about their work and priorities. They also said they enjoyed the welcoming atmosphere, reasonably spacious agenda (after the workshop was extended to a full day), and the use of creative techniques, which despite some people's initial anxieties enabled them to think more freely and tap into shared values and aspirations.

There were fewer comments on what participants found less useful or enjoyable, but each of the following points were raised by at least one person who felt the organisers could have signalled the purpose of the workshop more clearly in advance and tried to schedule it on a less challenging day (the London workshop was held two days before the Illegal Migration Act received Royal Assent); started the session later to avoid peak hours; better integrated the visual materials into the workshop activities; varied the techniques for gathering feedback after group sessions; ensured the sound quality in the room was better, especially for non-native English speakers; invited a larger group and booked a larger venue; ensured other funders in the room provided more detail about their work; had a more formalised 'get to know each other session' at the start; extended the workshop to a full day; and asked people to share their pronouns at the start of the day. The last three points were addressed in subsequent workshops.

In addition to these points, several people said they were keen for PHF to find a way to build on the workshops to ensure that conversations continue and that these lead, in time, to change. We heard: "I think more regular sessions like this could be beneficial". "we need a regional structure for on-going conversations", and a desire for "an umbrella for this program to ensure implementation of the good ideas being shared."

The PHF team is aware that not everyone provided feedback and is keen to continue to hear from participants, as well as other groups and organisations, about things it can do differently and better in future to support colleagues, including with shared visioning and planning.

Comments and suggestions can be sent to: [migration@phf.org.uk](mailto:migration@phf.org.uk).

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