

**Written evidence submitted by We Belong (MFB0002)**

**Transcript of Home Affairs Select Committee public engagement event with We Belong, Tuesday 3 November 2020**

**Attendees:** Chrisann, Tashi, Tosin, Zino, Ijeoma, Samuel

**Members:** Yvette Cooper MP, Tim Loughton MP, Dehenna Davison MP, Simon Fell MP, Adam Holloway MP

**Chair:** A huge thank you to all of you for agreeing to come and talk to us. The Home Affairs Select Committee, we do reports and investigations into anything and everything that the Home Office does. And we can ask questions and scrutinise any of the work that the Home Office does. We've done all kinds of reports in the past, looking particularly at different aspects of the immigration system, we look at issues around policing and crime and so on as well. And this week, we're going to be asking questions to the Immigration Minister, Kevin Foster so this felt to us as a good time, and it was Tim's suggestion, that we have an event with you to mark Parliament Week and to hear your experiences of the immigration system: what you found, how you found it worked or didn't work and what your views are about how the immigration system should change or reform.

We're very much in your hands, we'll have a series of different questions that we want to put to you but also, we just want to hear your views and your thoughts. We have Simon Fell, one of the other Committee Members who has joined us as well, and we may have other people joining us as we go through.

What I thought we should maybe do to start is each introduce ourselves. So those of us from the Committee start by introducing ourselves but then if I ask each of you to then introduce yourselves and if you could say something, anything just about your experience, your personal experience of the immigration system, anything that you would like us to know. Any main issue that you would like to flag up to us. So, we'll just go round in turn and get everybody's thoughts. And then we'll start with asking some questions about some different themes.

My name is Yvette Cooper and I'm the Labour MP for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford. I was elected 23 years ago. Normanton is a constituency near Leeds, about 20 minutes' drive outside Leeds. I was born in Scotland, grew up in England and a Yorkshire MP as well. I've been the Chair of this Committee for a few years. Previously, I worked in a Labour Government on different issues before 2010.

Let me pass over to Tim Loughton.

**Tim Loughton:** Thank you Chair. Really good to see everybody. As the Chair said, I'm partly responsible for you being here today because of that event, I think a couple of months ago now. I recognise Tashi you were there, and I think some others were part of that. It was such a fascinating event. Laura Farris was there, one of the other Committee Members, too. It is a different angle on the whole immigration issue which we've been studying. Your experience of young people who have been here for many years, in many cases for most of your lives and yet

you're still in a state of limbo. I thought it really helpful to get you to come along and speak to the Committee directly and I suggested that at the meeting. It's really good that you are going to be formally giving evidence to the Home Affairs Select Committee as part of our parliamentary inquiry into the whole immigration system and a different angle from what we've had before on what is actually wrong with it.

My name is Tim Loughton. I'm the MP for Worthing and Shoreham in Sussex, which is where I grew up. I got into Parliament in the same year as Yvette, 1997. I'm a Conservative, Yvette was on the other side. I've been on the Home Affairs Select Committee since 2014, so they haven't gotten rid of me yet. I think I'm the longest-standing Member who's left but before that I was the Children's Minister in the Coalition Government. So, issues to do with children and young people, and particularly around refugees and asylum-seeking children, which is something Yvette and I have been working on very jointly across party with the Immigration Bill in Parliament at the moment. So, those are the areas that really interest me so that's why particularly keen that we got your expertise first-hand in front of the Committee today. Thank you very much everybody for being part of this.

**Simon Fell:** Thank you Chair. I'm Simon Fell, I am the Member of Parliament for Barrow-in-Furness. I was elected last December so I'm a relatively new MP, although I'm not feeling very spritely at the moment. Cumbria, if you don't know it, is in the North West of England. It is a beautiful place so touching the Lake District but with industrial towns at its heart. I joined the Home Affairs Select Committee shortly after being elected. As Tim and the Chair have been saying, we've been looking at this issue for quite some time and it's fascinating. Much like everything in politics, you realise that the story you often hear in the media only scratches the surface of the complexity of really what goes on. Tim and Laura came back from the session with you saying just how fascinating it was. I'm really glad you're here and to have the opportunity to hear your views.

**Dehenna Davison:** Thank you Yvette. I'm Dehenna. I'm the new MP for Bishop Auckland having been elected back in December. I'm one of the newer Members of the Committee – I joined when Simon back in February which now feels like a million years ago given everything that's been happening this year. I was really excited when Yvette told us that you guys were going to speak to us. So, thank you. I'm looking forward to hearing your insights. It's such an important issue and I think it's really great that we get to hear it from a different perspective and hear your voices so thank you.

**Chair:** So can I now handover to you, Chrisann, I don't know if you want to start and talk about We Belong and also about your own personal experience and your thoughts on things that need to change as well.

**Chrisann:** Thank you Chair. My name is Chrisann, I just turned 26 three days ago. I'm Co-CEO of We Belong. It is the UK's first migrant youth-led charity. We were launched around exactly a year ago and we advocate and share power with young people. Our vision is for young migrants in the UK to be treated equally and fairly. We work primarily with young people between the ages of 16-25, all of whom migrated here as children, predominantly from Commonwealth countries and many have precarious status and are on the ten-year route to settlement. They see themselves as British in all but paperwork and the UK as their home.

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And one of the things I would love to focus on today is the fact that a lot of the rhetoric around migration is skewed towards those who are making first point of contact with the immigration system – out of country applications. It really neglects the immigration policies as they currently are for those who are already in the country and have strong ties here. I think there needs to be a re-focus, an immigration system that looks at both: out of country and in country applications, with particular focus on those on the ten-year route to settlement which is the longest route within our immigration system itself.

**Tashi:** As Chrisann has mentioned, we both work for We Belong and the young people that you'll be hearing from today are part of our core network. But the thing that unites us is that we're all on the ten-year route to settlement, all of us have limited leave to remain and that is where our experience and engagement with the Home Office and immigration policy lies. Personally, I came to the UK when I was seven years old and I just turned 24 a couple of months ago. I won't be eligible for British citizenship until I am 30 years old.

So, for limited leave to remain, it is a form of status that's granted, in our case, to those who have strong ties to the UK and have spent more than half their lives here. The Home Office has recognised these strong ties and gives us leave to remain for about 30 months. Just to give a bit more background about this: we much renew this status four times over a ten-year period, each time at a different cost. In total these fees can be about £14,000 for the entire route to settlement, from the first application all the way through to citizenship. These fees are set to increase next year in April again after the immigration health surcharge is increased in October. Our argument is this route is the most onerous and costly in comparison with other routes and it does really prevent us from fully integrating into society, even though we feel that we are British in all but paperwork.

**Tosin:** Thank you Chair. My name is Tosin. I'm 24 years old. I came into the country when I was nine years old so just over 14 years ago. I'm currently a university student studying Business and Events Management at the University of Hertfordshire, on track for a first-class degree. With everything going on with COVID-19, this year has really been a tough year with my renewal because I couldn't make up the money due to not being able to work since March. So, this is one of the reasons why we're here today is just to raise awareness about our situation, especially what we went through this year. Thank you.

**Zino:** Thank you Chair and hello everyone. My name is Zino and I'm 25. I moved to the UK when I was 9 years old, so I've obviously lived here for the majority of my life. I've been part of We Belong since 2016 and that's been its own great journey and I'm really thankful for that because it's helped me to understand the immigration system in a way that I wouldn't necessarily have had the opportunity to do if I hadn't done that. I'm hoping today to share a bit about experiences and talk about the mental and financial impact it has on young people and their families. And hopefully we can do that as we go along. Thank you.

**Ijeoma:** My name is Ijeoma. I'm 26 years old. I study Psychology at the University of Bedfordshire. I've been with We Belong since its inception in 2014, when it was called 'Let Us Learn'. The reason for me joining today was just to talk about the impact that leave to remain has had on my own experience and those of my peers and just to reiterate the fact that it does have such a devastating impact on us.

It's virtually seeing that we aren't just short-term migrants, we're here and we want to stay. And I just want to be able to get that point across and see how we can best impact the policies that impact us.

**Samuel:** Thank you Chair. My name is Samuel. I'm 20 years old. I moved to the UK when I was 11. I'm currently a student of politics at Kings College London and I'm just grateful for the opportunity to be here to share my personal experience but also because of the impact We Belong has had on my life since 2016 I basically didn't know anything around immigration. It seemed odd for someone that did emigrate at a young age, it seemed like a foreign world as I woke to the challenges that it offered me and I started to realise how it has affected so many other people around me and how others have suffered in silence. Fortunately enough I was able to get in contact with We Belong and they supported me on this journey but many other people like myself don't know about We Belong. There isn't enough We Belong out there. And I really just hope that after this conversation, it will result in the challenges that these young people face being reduced. The work that We Belong does to facilitate integration and support for these young people be increased.

**Chair:** So, can we start with your current experiences, particularly of the limited leave to remain on the ten-year route to settlement. Just tell us a bit, each of you, about your experiences on that at the moment and what impact that has on you. I would also like to ask a bit about your experiences coming up to that and before you reached that point. It would be really useful to start with how it's affecting you at the moment.

**Tashi:** The limited leave to remain, as I explained, is a very onerous route and we have to make the four applications all of which now, since the immigration health surcharge increased, now costs us £2593 per application. The biggest barrier for this process, I think, is the length of the route as well as the financial impact. For me personally, I have to pay for myself and for my Mum because my Mum isn't mentally fit enough to work so that costs us £5000 each time we pay. When we finish this route it will be about £25,000 we will have given to the Home Office. And this seeps into every part of our lives.

When I was ten years old, I was detained and it was a very surreal experience for me. Going through school, I had always been a goody-two-shoes, always concentrating on getting perfect grades, never stepping a toe out of line. I was in so much shock when I was detained and put behind bars because that's exactly what it felt like – it felt like a prison. We were held there for about a month and we were treated like criminals. My mum suffers from clinical depression, PTSD because she's a torture survivor. And she wasn't even allowed access to her medication. We spent around a month there and it's an experience that doesn't leave you. So, every time now that I renew my application, that constant interaction with the Home Office puts me back into that mindset. Because I just feel like if I can't afford my next application that threat of detention and deportation stays with me. All of these experiences, fees, mental health impact is something we've looked at in our NIAL Report. We did a 'Normality is a Luxury' Report so this all seeps in. My experiences are similar to all the other young people on our call.

**Ijeoma:** I'd also like to add that when I was 15, I was also detained alongside my younger brother and it was just as harrowing as Tashi described. It was probably one of the worst experiences of my life. Just like Tashi, I was also very good in school. I was part of the school

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council, I was an ambassador. I'd never been in trouble once. So, to be taken away and put in basically a jail was a shock to the system to say the least. Having been there for so long was detrimental to my mental health and when I went back to school, I kind of, not even kind of, I had to lie about where I'd been to all my school friends because I couldn't even face the truth myself because I couldn't even understand it being so young and not understanding my immigration status.

**Chair:** How long were held in detention for?

**Ijeoma:** I believe it was around 4-6 weeks, but the Home Office disputes that.

Chair: And in terms of the impact, what impact does it have on you now? What's the impact of how both the experience of what happened to you and also, the limited leave to remain experience now?

**Ijeoma:** Just like Tashi, it's pretty much the same. Every time I go for renewal, which for me was only, I think I just renewed mine in October. I go through the same things Tashi does. I always think back to, am I going to be detained again. Will I be sent back to a country I don't know anything about? And it just adds on anxiety and it puts you in such a depressive state. And I really do dread when my renewal comes around. But you know when you have to do it, it is kind of what pushes you on. But the mental state it has you in is not something I'd wish on anybody.

**Zino:** Like I said, I moved to the UK when I was nine years old. I've lived here ever since basically. I've built my life and developed my formative years in the UK. I've been educated by the UK system. I still remember my first day of primary school and just remembering the Christmas of the air and looking at all these kids' faces and being excited, will they be in my class, are they going to be my friends, that kind of thing.

I've developed my education and my understanding of the world through my years in the UK. And for me, and many others, I've come through We Belong. I got to the stage of A-Levels and thinking about my future past secondary school and sixth form and suddenly found that my status actually blocked me from accessing student finance. And my family and society has always said that university is the best platform to be able to have a successful future or at least have that chance to be able to have a successful future. I truly believe that. So, when I found out that I couldn't actually access student finance all my plans and all these ideas that I had for myself were suddenly gone. I didn't know what to do. Being a first child there was no one for me to ask questions on and you know, use their experience. I was that teaching experience for my siblings.

I couldn't get student finance so; my family was really determined and that meant that I ended up having to pay international fees for my university and deciding on my university based on location and not actually what was best for my degree. So, what was going to be cheaper for me to get to basically. You know my fees were upward of £10,000 and £11,000 which for some people that could be double. On top of that, we were also trying to pay for immigration fees. My sister was working two jobs to be able to put me through my education and losing out on hers. So, it was a really difficult time mentally. I had to take a year out because that first year was such a struggle we couldn't even pay the full fees. It was only for the love and community

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that I had from my church that I was actually able to get through the rest of my degree. So, they came together collectively to be able to provide the money for me to continue through. And a lot of people don't have that community. A lot of people don't have family or people to talk to about the stuff that they go through. And this is why I mention that I was really glad that I found We Belong because there is a group of people that we can talk to about our issues and our struggles where we don't necessarily have that in wider community. So, I hope that's a brief explainer.

**Tosin:** Just like the rest of the people from We Belong on the panel, my story is quite similar. I came here when I was 9 years old in 2006. I did the rest of my primary education and secondary education, sixth form with the hopes of going to university in 2015 but that was cut short and I was stopped because I was unable to access student finance. When I got my limited leave to remain in 2014, it was a sense of relief. I thought that now I had built up my sense of completing my education. I was able to do that but then I found out that I was not able to continue. So, with that I had to start doing jobs, so I started an apprenticeship in Business Administration in 2015. With that I was trying to build experience on top of the education I already had.

I had a sense of failure because I was seeing my friends progress and I was not progressing the same way that my friends were progressing. So, that really affected my mental health. I felt like an outsider, especially in 2018, when all my friends were graduating and that was the year I started university. With that I was working multiple part-time jobs to be able to sustain myself and also sustain my status.

For example, in 2017, I was working 40 hours because I needed to save almost £2000 for my renewal in 2017. Recently, this year, I was doing the same. I was going to university and working 40 hours to save up for my recent renewal in August. But that was cut short in March when I was not able to work anymore because of COVID-19. I really struggled with that, especially as I had to depend on my Mum who is a care worker on the London Living Wage. So, our income was really limited this year and I couldn't find a way to raise the fees anymore. I only managed to raise half the fees which is the normal application fees but the IHS, I was unable to do that. Thank God there are charities like We Belong out there who were able to help me. Like Zino said, other people aren't so lucky. It really affects you knowing that you're this close to being pushed out of a status that you've been trying your best to regularise. So, we just hope that with this talk it will open up our experiences because we feel like we're being looked at as a monolith. We're not being looked at as the different experiences that we go through.

**Chrisann:** I just wanted to say as well that from my personal experience, I've been here since the age of 8 and I got my leave to remain in 2014. Chair, you asked two things – you asked us about what happens when you're on this route, so I want to comment on that first and the second, you asked also what led us to being on this route.

So, the first thing I'd say is I started in 2014 and every 30 months, on limited leave to remain, you have to renew. When I renewed, my first renewal was in 2016 when I was at the LSE studying Law. I was in my final year of my degree and I submitted my application on the same basis on my private life that had not changed. The Home Office took over ten months to get

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back to me with my simple renewal. Every time I called the Home Office, it was a simple customer service response – we are still processing your application. This not only disrupted my degree, I was being told if I didn't have my status, I wouldn't be given my degree certificate. And number two, even after I had graduated with the grace of my university giving me my degree, I got a job and over six months, I could not provide my ID, my passport and I kept having to do the right to work check because it expires so many times.

The renewal not only causes a lot of anxiety, but it is also a disrupt to your current life as it is. Employers are not looking at young people like myself despite our great degrees and great futures ahead of us because of our temporary status. And they feel like there's too much of an uncertainty around this. So, I'd say that the right to work check and the renewals are not straightforward. It really discourages young people from entering the job market, as it did with me.

The second thing I'd say is – how did we come to this stage? I'd like to say to the Committee that you can do everything right, come here lawfully as we all did, apply for your renewals and try to navigate this very complex immigration system.

I was 8 years old when I came here. After five years of being on limited leave to remain, on discretionary leave to remain, my Mum applied for my settlement. That was in 2007. In 2012, the Home Office came back to us and said they lost all our paperwork. And actually, our case was in the legacy files. Instead of righting their wrongs and giving us our settlement, they told us to apply again. Since then, all my family have been put on the ten-year route to settlement. Instead of correcting their mistake, they simply say make another application.

So, for many of us, even if you do the right thing, you abide by the rules, you renew in time, you can still be caught up in this very bad system. And that is exactly why the Windrush scandal put shockwaves in myself and the rest of the community. If that could happen to them what could happen to us and we're on temporary status.

**Chair:** Can I ask each of you briefly which route you or your parents had come through in the first place. And then how long it took before you were given limited leave to remain. So, how long it took before you got to that point.

**Tosin:** Thank you Chair. So, we came here as a family, my Mum and my brother and me in 2006. And we had to regularise our status. We didn't hear back until we were told to apply again. In 2013, we were given a deportation notice but due to our strong ties to the UK, especially with me and my brother, we were told to apply again in 2014 for a new application and that's when we were given our limited leave to remain in 2014. And we were put on the ten-year route to settlement.

**Zino:** We did many applications in the entire process which is typical of anyone who applies for any form of status. A little bit of background, my sister and I obviously grown up in the same household, live the same life, had the same kind of story. In 2015, she got her status, and I didn't, I'm understanding that once again, our lives and our story is the exact same thing. So there was a question around that. So, my family appealed that decision, and we eventually got that in 2016. So that's how long I've had my status for.

**Samuel:** So, in regards to my personal journey, from arrival in the UK, I came in under the Tier One visa which is a five-year route to settlement. At that age, you don't really engage with immigration. Unfortunately, some years later, my Mum, who was the main applicant at the time, passed away and as a result, two years after, the UK Home Office said that because she was the main applicant and this was five years after residency in the UK, with my formative years in high school and my little brother came here at six, they sent a message saying, unfortunately, because of the death of the main applicant, you'll have to continue on your settlement journey.

So that began a whole cycle of legal cases, literally, for me, it's just wild. Oddly enough, it was one of the best years of my life. I had just recently been elected as the Member of Youth Parliament for Manchester. And I got funded to start a social enterprise at a young age. It felt like things are going well. And then receiving this letter just felt like a dampener. Especially because of how ridiculous the reason that was given, it just seemed absurd. So that began a legal battle that took two years, which I very much like to say, in regards to communication with the Home Office, it was not a great experience. And, to put it in a polite way, their response rate is absolutely atrocious. But, fortunately, after the legal battle, we were put onto the ten-year route to settlement again. I have to reiterate I came on the five-year route to settlement. It just seems crazy.

At this point, I believe that I will be eligible for citizenship around 2029. And which is when 29 years old. Now, the impact this has had on my life? It really derailed how 2019 went despite all the positive news. A lot of young people like us will persist and we choose to push forward. And hence why you see us here today. But I'd like to say that we're just the fortunate few who've built our resilience to overcome these challenges. And the more you look and realise that, you know, the fees of the Home Office, are so grand, including the NHS surcharge, you start to lose hope unfortunately.

I recently renewed my leave to remain this year, in October, about two weeks ago. Over the course of the last two years, I had gotten three jobs, and had to save our entire visa renewal fees.

Over the span of the last two years, I had saved the entirety of the immigration cost which is around £10,000 for a family of four. And well, I felt personally responsible to ensure that I can support my father who trialled this whole process. His work permit had been revoked and reinstated, making it very difficult to keep a stable job. And so, the family was in a very financially precarious situation. And if we had waited a week longer, this would have increased by £2000 extra, because of the IHS surcharge increase. For any child who sees their family dealing with such a volatile fee, that is also quite important because you run the risk of going out of the route because of the fees. You feel the need to do something and so I did. But if I hadn't spent that money on the immigration fees, I would have had a lot of money to invest in other things, like my future. To invest in community projects that I'd run and been funded for when I was 16 when this whole journey started.

And this is the decision that a lot of other young people will have to face. You're entrenched in your community and you want to do so much for it, but you have to prioritise your renewal fees over everything, including your career, education and aspirations as a whole.

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**Chair:** Samuel, very sorry about your Mum. And huge congratulations to you for the work that you have done for the Youth Parliament and social enterprise. Just absolutely amazing. I'm sorry you've had such a tough time to get there but it's absolutely fantastic what you're doing at the moment so thank you for sharing that as well.

**Tim Loughton:** I think this is the biggest number of witnesses we've had from different locations, virtually in front of the Committee ever. Look, I just want to reiterate what Yvette's just said.

I mean, some of those testaments we've heard, which is why I was so keen they should get a wider audience, are just extraordinary. And everything you have all been through to get here, to look after yourselves and your families, to get through what all sounds have been exceedingly successful school and university careers, and to hold down full-time jobs at the same time as trying to do college courses and having to stump up loads of money to pay the Home Office, for frankly, crap service is extraordinary.

The thing I couldn't believe, Tashi, you said it – it's not until 2030 that your status would have been completely regularised. And you've been here since the age of seven. You've known very little else apart from the UK and that goes for just about everybody else. And yet, the UK is treating you still as outsiders. And so, your theme of British in all but paperwork absolutely sums it up.

So that's why we need to do something. And that's why we need your ammunition to allow us to lobby the Home Office and Ministers to see how you can get a better deal. Anyway, I'm saying that on my part and whether the rest of the Committee agrees... I'm sure they do.

But anyway, the question is practically what are your sort of preferences in terms of your ask? So you've highlighted, you have to wait this 10 years, for other applications, there's the five-year journey. Could that be changed in some way? You have to pay these excessive fees several times during that 10-year application, you also have to pay the full whack of the NHS surcharge which is going up again. And yet, many of you have been working and paying taxes as well. It's not like you're health tourists here just to take advantage of the NHS.

What are your list of priorities of how your time could be easier, and what the Home Office could do in terms of priorities to address any of those things? In what order?

**Tashi:** Thank you Tim for that. I think for priorities, the thing that would make the most difference to us is for the Government to review the costs and the length of the ten-year route to a simpler five-year route. All we want is parity.

Once the new points-based system comes in, we want parity for all young people, from non-EU and EU migrants. And this would ensure that young people that have lived here for more than half their lives, would ease the anxiety and create consistency within Home Office approaches.

They shouldn't be treating us any differently when they know that our future is here. And I think probably going on to that, the second priority would be for us to review the Immigration Health Surcharge. I think, as you made really relevant points Tim, the Immigration Health Surcharge doesn't make sense for us who have been contributing.

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As we've heard from today, multiple part-time jobs and paying into the system through taxes and then paying into the system again through our immigration fees. We use the NHS, but we feel like we're exactly like our British peers.

It just doesn't make sense. The Government has consistently said that it makes sense for those who are here temporarily. But like, you know, people like Ijeoma, who came here when she was two years old, and she will be 31 when she gets British citizenship. I don't know would consider that temporary. It's just crazy that she has to contribute twice to pay the NHS.

**Tim Loughton:** So that's the five-year route so cutting down the length of time, and then the health surcharge, anybody else got a different set of priorities or other things they would much rather the Home Office were to change sooner rather than later?

**Chrisann:** I think I would add early warning systems almost. When the red flags go up, the Home Office should listen. I really appreciate the new campaign: "the face behind the case" that they have launched to try and humanise the whole debate around migration not to see us as statistics. But as I just wanted to link this to Windrush and what happened.

I think one of the people that we asked said, actually Chrisann, it's a foreshadowing of what could happen to me if the Home Office don't recognise that the current route is too complex and too costly. So I would really encourage them that once they're making these cultural changes, to really take heed and listen to organisations and young people like us, who are saying that, if you don't tighten your boots, in a couple of years, you might regret another scandal happening. And this would be another set of young that came here, also, predominantly from Commonwealth nations lawfully, and just being tracked in this legal limbo. So, I would just make that point alongside the rest of asks that Tashi has made I think that would be it. That they should work with stakeholders, like us, to ensure that it never happens again.

**Tim Loughton:** I think that is a really good point and we can certainly feed that through. I mean, it's taken Windrush, for the Home Office to have to wake up to the fact that it's not a very user-friendly outfit, it's hugely bureaucratic. And the onus is always on you to have to prove your point or get your paperwork in rather than them. Actually, they have made it as difficult as possible for you to do it. So, I think this is really good ammunition again, for a different group of people who have really been treated in a rather hostile way by the Home Office.

On that point, I just wanted to ask, Tosin, you said you've had to break to get all this money as if you can't get it then you may lose your status and then you could be deported. And some of you said that your families faced getting deported some years ago. How big a thing is that? Do you have many friends who have actually fallen foul because they couldn't get together those amounts of money and they have actually been deported? Is that happening much already?

**Tosin:** Thank you Tim. Fortunately, I don't have anyone close to me that has been pushed to be deported. For instance, this year, I was unable to raise the fees for the IHS and I do know that a lot of people live in fear of deportation as sometimes you have to pick who gets to renew.

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I know of cases where family members are picking what kids can they renew and what kids can't they renew due to the fact they can't afford these fees. In my case this year, I could not raise the £1000 IHS fee and I was going through lots of stages of what ways I could do it. Thank God I had charities like We Belong who were able to help us during this hard time. But if the Government was helping other groups in need during this time, I thought that we were very overlooked in terms of help. They could've helped people on limited leave and for example.

I really appreciate the Government helping with the NHS and careworkers in terms of their applications this year. We haven't seen that in my family. My Mum has been working in care since 2006 when we entered the country. She's been working with Haringey Council and now she's working with Hackney Council and she even got nominated for Carer of the Year two years ago. And all those accolades for the country to push back at us and say we still have to double pay what we are already contributing to. It's a knock to the face but hopefully with this conversation we can find a solution to this.

**Tim Loughton:** The more you lot go on the more inadequate I feel for everything that you and your families have achieved. It's amazing.

**Zino:** Yes, thank you, Tim. I just wanted to highlight just based on some of the stuff that Tosin and others have said. We were talking earlier about priorities.

And I wanted to highlight that everything that we said today, and all the examples we've given, just highlight how much the policies are made in a vacuum. You know, they don't consider the effects of real life on people. Losing family members, having to apply for university, having to do all these things. They just don't consider that fact. And for a lot of people, you end up in this cycle, like Samuel, mentioned, instead of actually building for your future and contributing to society in a bigger way and developing all these ideas, you're in the cycle of work, pay for my status, work, pay for status, work.

That's not fair on the country as a whole. When we have all these amazing young people who can build our society in such an amazing way.

**Tim Loughton:** Well said.

**Ijeoma:** Thank you, Chair. And thank you, Tim. I just wanted to add on to what Tosin and Zino had mentioned. As Tashi had mentioned, I'd been in the country since I was two years old. And I've always lived here and I came here lawfully, as well, and my Mum. And for me, the fees are the biggest thing that impacted me personally, especially this year, with COVID, and everything.

And being a new student in university, I found it incredibly difficult to raise the fees. And if it wasn't for the fact that I had worked a lot during the last year before the pandemic hit, I wouldn't have been able to raise the fees. And even then, I still had to get some help from my Mum to pay for the IHS surcharge.

But with that, if I'd fallen out of status, like I know someone who had gone up to eight years into her leave to remain and just because of a technicality with her documents, she was made to restart because then she had reached the cut-off point, so she had lost out on eight years and eight years' worth of fees and had to restart the ten-year route all over again.

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So that has always been one of my biggest fears. And I think as young people, it's already so difficult for us to just raise the fees and keep up with the payments. And the fact that we don't pay the same amount each time, we have to keep on raising higher amounts just to be able to keep up status in a country that we do call home and we see ourselves being here, if not for the rest of our lives, at least well into adulthood.

And I just think that it's so unfair to be sucking us, like Zino said, into that vacuum and creating this instability in the way we look at ourselves. Even though we see ourselves as British, the rest of society doesn't. And the fact that we have to pay such extortionate fees further pushes that rhetoric of not belonging here, which is not how we feel, but how we feel society treats us.

**Tim Loughton:** Thanks, Ijeoma.

**Chrisann:** Yes, I would just like to say within the We Belong network, we're in contact with just over 1300 young people up and down the country. And you mentioned about deportation and, actually, I feel that this system really does break families apart.

We have a lot of situations where young came here as a family unit, Mum and Dad, and the actual immigration system meant that one parent was deported. So, it's enforcing this forced single parent narrative where, sometimes, but most of the time, it is single Mums that have to bear the brunt of the rest of the family, in terms of the application.

So, I'd say it's a very, very real fear that we have and when we are in contact with young people, we find that a lot of the time a lot of this stuff doesn't materialise into them having unlawful status back again, because of the fluidity around it.

But one of the things that really kind of makes us frustrated is that whenever we talk about the high fees that are actually driving people into destitution the Home Office always say you can just apply for a fee waiver. And that is not the right answer that we need. Because we know that 75%-90% of fee waiver applications have been rejected in the last five years. So, a fee waiver is not the solution. An actual review of the current system, and how much it costs, and the fact that out of £2033 immigration application fee, only about £150 is taken to process an application. So, I don't think because we already contribute to this country, with our taxes, etc, that we should have to bear the brunt of sustaining the entire immigration system that we already, you know, shouldn't have to contribute to. And so, I think that that would be my last thing, that the normal cop-out that the Home Office has to say – apply for a fee waiver and we know that doesn't work.

**Chair:** And we have Adam Holloway, another one of the Committee Members joining us.

**Adam Holloway:** In terms of the immigration system, what do you guys think needs to be done?

**Tashi:** I can answer this one. I think what needs to be done, echoing what has already been said, the priority for the Government is to not make policy in a vacuum and to consult the communities most affected. The priority is to ensure that another Windrush doesn't happen. And the government should look at existing policies, and, where necessary make changes.

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It should also be a priority for the Government to respect British values and in doing so, ensure that this new immigration system we get is fair, humane and also respects social integration. And, as we've said, we think the EU Settlement Scheme is a good example of a simple, less costly scheme, that works and gives a good chance of people regularising their status, and we just want parity.

And we want to work with the government as well. We've tried constantly to engage with the Immigration Minister, and the constant requests for meetings and stuff, but we've not really had much luck. And we would just really like for them to engage as the Wendy Williams report on Windrush has strongly suggested to work with voices of the people that the Home Office interacts with.

**Chair:** I think that might be a question we can put to the Immigration Minister tomorrow.

**Simon Fell:** Thanks Chair. I just want to go back to a point you made Chrisann around customer service responses. And it sounds very much like you're basically getting computer says no, back from the Home Office, whenever you ask the question.

To your mind, what does good look like? And I suppose the second part of this, and Tashi, you may have already answered this in your last response. Have you had any dialogue with the Home Office around how they can improve this? Are they listening? Do you feel like they are inclined to try to improve things for you? Or, is this just a conversation that keeps going round in circles?

**Chrisann:** Thank you Simon. I think yes, it's just a generic response you always get. And what does good customer service look like? Well, we are paying a ridiculous amount of money, so we'd expect some sort of base level correspondence with the Home Office. I think that with all services you interact with, if you're paying a lot of money, you expect, not for there to be a personalised kind of update every five days, but, something when milestones have gone. The time for the Home Office to make a decision is up to six months. And when that time is gone, they should be proactively engaging with the people that have their applications are in, to give them a substantial update: to say this is exactly what's happening.

And then it becomes personalised. We're not expecting a week after submitting an application for them to say, here's what's happening, because we understand that there might be delays. But the administrative burdens are really bad and when you're interacting with the Home Office, given that your leave to remain is so inter-linked with everything else: your ability to work, have your bank account, rent an apartment, it's really crucial that we get substantial updates.

I think the second thing we'd say is that in 2018, after one year of trying to meet with the then Immigration Minister, Caroline Nokes, we finally met with her. And unfortunately, two weeks later, there was a cabinet reshuffle. So we really had some great engagement with her where we highlighted that actually, we are caught up in the unintended consequences of policies that are made in a vacuum.

So, I would really want there to be a continuation of the conversations that were started with Caroline Nokes, with Kevin Foster now and to highlight the issue to Priti Patel, to show that

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actually, we're here to stay, and we just want the best conditions for us to really thrive in this country.

**Simon Fell:** Thank you for that. Just one thing to follow up on that. Obviously, it's not just affecting you. It's creating a burden for your employer. I'm curious, have you had an experience or have any of you had an experience where you're going through this process, and you feel like your employer (or potential employer) is not engaging with you because of the burden that sits around that?

And the fact that they might not be able to get the documentation they need to take you on to provide that reassurance. Are you seeing those sorts of impacts as well?

**Tashi:** I can quickly answer that question. So last time, I applied for my leave to remain application, I waited 18 months for any response. And I was at university during that time. And I was on a scholarship with limited money. So, I needed to be able to work.

The Home Office took my passport last time, so I had no way of proving my right to work. And every time I applied for any sort of jobs, I'd just get a straight off denial. I'd maybe be invited to interviews because they just want to see your documents.

And especially the type of jobs that I was applying for were jobs with a high turnover. So, it's just not in their interest to look and to contact the Home Office to check if I was able to work. So for like 10 months, I was unable to find any source of income, even though the Home Office says there's a way for them to do that. And it puts a significant burden on employers as well who are obliged to check the right to work.

And sometimes we've heard of Home Office renewals taking months and even years. And just because on our status it says limited leave to remain, employers can think that sometimes it's temporary and if your leave to remain is about to expire in a few months, then they are really less likely to hire you. We've had cases of young We Belong members that have really struggled to get employment, especially now during COVID times as well, if their leave to remain is about to expire because the employers just don't the quest don't want to take the risk because of the high fines associated if something were to happen. But as we said, we're not really going anywhere.

**Chrisann:** I just want to quickly add on to that because, actually a lot of our young people are at university and are signing up for vacation schemes and it just reminded me of my own experience where I signed up to vacation scheme at Clifford Chance. And a lot of these corporate firms, they don't have on that form 'limited leave to remain' as a status. They don't have that.

And so, it is an extra hurdle for young people who have called us, some at other universities, some at Kings, to say that I've got this amazing application through but they don't understand my status – how do I explain it to them? I'm not a Tier Four, I'm not on a student visa, I don't have settlement or have citizenship. So, where is this legal limbo. And so, we have to take it upon ourselves to not only educate the employer, because we aren't part of their checklist, but also, have that anxiety to think that perhaps we might not be as attractive despite our educational track record and achievements because of our status.

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**Zino:** On top of what Tashi and Chrisann have just said, I also wanted to highlight the fact that it also breeds a risk of young people, and anyone else, being in an environment that isn't necessarily safe for them. Because, this is the feeling that I've always had, when it comes close to renewal, it was a time when I was in-between jobs and I needed to build that: one, get a job to pay for my renewal and two, get a job so I can build my career.

But at the same time, I was also desperate to make sure that I was in an organisation that understood the system because it's such a difficult thing to explain. If you're already in a job where your employer isn't the greatest, they don't really care or respect their employees in a way that is safe and humane. You might decide to stay in that job because it's safer for you to stay there when you're doing your renewal than apply for something new. And that just breeds dangerous territory for so many people. I just want that to be considered as well in the conversation.

**Ijeoma:** I just wanted to reiterate a point that Chrisann made about not being put down on lists for jobs. When I was applying to university, a lot of them didn't have or didn't even understand what limited leave to remain was. I remember one of the universities I'd applied to, I had to literally explain to them and send them links about what limited leave to remain was. And just make them understand that I wasn't just a singular person in this situation.

And the fact that I've had loads of friends and myself as well – when I apply for a job, looking through their criteria and seeing that they don't have limited leave to remain on their list, so I have to tell you what kind of status I have and it's an extra hurdle for me which Chrisann mentioned.

It just brings that feeling of unwantedness and making you feel like you are just not part of society even though you want to contribute so much to it. We've been paying our taxes and it always feels like we have to jump one hurdle after another just to feel part of society.

**Simon Fell:** Thank you that's really interesting.

**Chair:** Can I just ask about what the impact of COVID has had on everybody? And obviously, making it harder to work if you have payments due – has anybody had a more sympathetic response from the Home Office because of the COVID crisis which was one of the things they said they would be doing. They told us they would be doing it at the beginning of the crisis when we raised exactly these issues with them about people not being able to manage payments because of what was happening with jobs. What sort of impact has COVID had on your experience?

You were all shaking your heads when I was saying have you had a more sympathetic experience but clearly not.

**Samuel:** Thank you very much Chair. I don't really have a prolonged answer, it's a simple no.

**Tosin:** Thank you very much Chair. As I said before, COVID-19 has really impacted me – I was working at the Royal Albert Hall and it had to close abruptly. So, for at least April, May. I didn't get any pay as they were trying to figure out how we were going to get furloughed.

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So, during those periods, they are usually are busy periods, getting ready for summer and I'd be working overtime as I had my renewal in August. My Mum is a carer as well so we thought we would be under the Government's response to NHS workers and carers but we did not hear anything from them. So, we had to pay.

I contacted my MP, Stella Creasy, in terms of any help that could be rendered because I was unable to raise half of my fees. She contacted the Immigration Minister Kevin Foster, who got back to me and told me to apply for a fee waiver. As Chrisann has already said, 90% of the time it will be rejected. So, with all of that, my brother was working overtime.

He was lucky enough to find a factory job during the pandemic lockdown. He was working nights, seven days a week and he did not take a break to be able to raise these fees. And with that and my Mum working as a carer we were able to manage to put £7000 in the space of four months together to make our renewal. It's just scary how we had to come up with so many different ways to raise this money and it really affected my mental health because I felt like a burden. And I felt like I couldn't do anything. I applied to over 100 jobs to be able to make these fees and I was just getting rejected due to the pandemic.

**Chair:** Even though your MP supported you in applying for review, you still didn't get...

**Tino:** Even though my MP wrote a letter to the Immigration Minister, the response was the only option is to apply for a fee waiver due to my case being so complex, we don't qualify for any other help, that's what we were told.

**Tashi:** Just to add to everything Tosin said, we've had multiple young people write to their MPs who have then written to the Minister, saying basically the same things that Tosin has experienced. Saying that they have had to work or forced to work during COVID times just because they have needed to make up their fees even though they would rather be self-isolating or on furlough.

It's made really precarious situations. But the response that we've always had back is for them to apply for fee waivers. And as Tosin mentioned, lots of fee waivers get rejected. And even if you were to apply for one, and if you were rejected, you then have 10 days to make up the rest of that entire money. So, if you can't make that money in 10 days, then you are out the system and your 10-year route starts again.

So, the Home Office really makes it so, so difficult for any kind of leeway for difficult or exceptional circumstances.

**Chair:** So, people are not applying for the fee waiver because if it's turned down, you then have an accelerated process.

**Tashi:** Yes, and because of the high rate of rejections as well. The criteria so narrow as well and really hard to prove too.

**Chair:** So, you haven't seen any change in the Home Office's approach to that fee waiver scheme because of COVID.

**Ijeoma:** For me personally, like I said, I had to renew my documents in October. And being a student, it was really hard. And I communicate a lot, or interact a lot with, a lot of posts from

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We Belong. And I'd retweeted something and somebody asked me about fee waivers and why I didn't apply for one. And I just kind of said, you know, it's really hard to get a fee waiver. And like Tashi mentioned, the criteria to get one is so high, you basically have to prove that you'd be destitute if you paid for the fee.

And with COVID, I don't think that has changed much. So, there is no point in me risking to apply for a fee waiver, not get it and then have that 10-day period to come up with the funds. Because assuming I don't have the funds already, that is basically impossible to come up with almost £3000 just to pay my fees. And so, they haven't, for me personally done anything for people who have been struggling with COVID. And like I mentioned, if it wasn't for my Mum, I don't think I would have even been able to pay the entirety of the fees on my own.

And, and I don't know if I mentioned this before, but when I was 18, I got separated from my Mum and brother because I was now an adult. So, my Mum and brother are a year and a half ahead of me while I'm behind. So even though that works in terms of fees, because we don't have to raise so much, it still made me feel like an outsider in my own home.

But again, it still applies because, like so many of us have mentioned, I was able to escape the IHS surcharge increase. But my Mum and my brother will be caught in it when they reapply next year, and possibly be caught up in another fee increase. So we don't even know how much they have to save up to the two of them. So, it's a constant ongoing battle of fees and how much you have to save.

**Chair:** Chrisann, you mentioned you have about 1300 members. Do you have any estimate about the number of young people who are in a similar situation to yours? And also, are there any other issues that other members would be raising that might be additional to the ones we've discussed today?

**Chrisann:** Out of the 1300 young people, around 80% have leave to remain. So, the exact same situation that's happening here. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were fortunate enough to receive some funding from some funders to create an emergency grant. And in only two weeks over 300 young people applied for basic needs and necessities as well as money for renewals of their applications.

But for us, seeing those applications and that fund being readily available, a lot of them would have fallen out of status unfortunately and the clock starting again. I think the other thing I wanted to say that's perhaps not mentioned as much, is that a lot of times the Home Office can be very confusing.

So, for example, the young people on limited leave to remain, they know that they are on the private life to settlement. And one of the things that's not mentioned today is that a lot of us are renewing without access to lawyers. So we're having to be clued up by ourselves, because it costs too much on top of the funds to pay lawyer fees.

So we have to navigate that by ourselves. So, when we put an application in, like one of our young people, put an application in for leave to remain, and then received a response from the Asylum and Refugee Department of the Home Office saying that they're considering their

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application, it's slightly confusing, because they know they're not applying for refugee and asylum seeking. They are not applying under the asylum route.

And that is actually so similar to what my family had actually faced. My Mum got a response from the Refugee and Asylum Unit of the Home Office, knowing that she's not applying under that route. So, the confusion comes from you applying and interacting on one basis, and then putting your application through to different departments and when you receive correspondence, you're even more confused. And having no lawyer to actually assist you to say, what does this actually mean? And no number to call to ask them to clarify.

Lastly, I'd say one of the things that we face is that when my Mum renewed for our application the last time, she received a welcome refugee pack. And she's on the 10-year route. And she was so confused. And they were saying, now you have the right to work. She said she's been working for a while now. She doesn't understand why she has now been given the right work. That confusion within the Home Office departments, it needs to be signposted to the right areas and again with the customer service so as not to confuse the applicant.

**Chair:** Chrisann, do you have any estimates around the number of people who might be in a similar situation?

**Chrisann:** The GLA did some research with the University of Wolverhampton and it said that there were over 300,000 children and young people across the UK, who have precarious status, which includes limited leave to remain. So that's the estimate that we're going on.

**Tosin:** Thank you Chair. I would just like to you ask the Minister tomorrow when you speak to him: what is the justification for paying the NHS immigration health surcharge when all of us, when we were able to at We Belong, started contributing towards taxes. The NHS health surcharge is designed for temporary migrants who are only going to be contributing to the NHS temporarily. But would the Minister see me and the other members of this panel today as being temporary? Given that we've been here for the majority of our lives.

**Chair:** I can assure you that we will be putting that and many more questions to the Immigration Minister.

**Zino:** I just wanted to say thank you for the opportunity and to be able to share, the voices of not just us, but so many other young people all across the UK. And I'm hoping that we can really work with the Immigration Minister on this – us and various other organisations. Who are determined for the system to work for everyone involved, the employees, the people that apply, and the employers that are reaching out to them as well.

**Ijeoma:** Thank you Chair. I mean, I just wanted to reiterate what Zino said. We do want this system to work for all of us. And for it to be a place where we don't feel like we just don't belong. And also, just to say, you know, we do feel that we belong here. We don't see anywhere else as our homes even though we were born in other countries. We've been here for so long we've integrated within society, and we don't see ourselves going anywhere else.

So we shouldn't feel like we are temporary migrants or like the country doesn't want us when we want to contribute so much to society. And we have contributed so much to society. Seeing

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that we've basically done primary and secondary school and for most of us, our university educations here and we have so much more to give.

**Chair:** Thank you all of you for your time today. But also thank you for the very powerful testimony that you have given today. With everything that you say, with every word you utter, you just demonstrate so strongly not only that you do belong but also that you are contributing so much to this country already.

And have so many more things that you will go on to do that will make your families very proud and all of us very proud of the things that you're doing as well. So, thank you so much for that.

You've given us a whole series of questions that we will put to the Immigration Minister. Questions that we will raise tomorrow in our evidence session but also more questions that we will pursue even when we don't manage to cover them tomorrow in the evidence session, as well.

I'm sorry that you have had such difficulty and frustrating experiences with the UK immigration system. The very best of luck to all of you with the amazing work that you are doing and the incredible things that I know all of you will be going onto do in your careers as well.

And thank you for the work you do with We Belong. That is really powerful – this is not just as you've shown about the work that you are doing for your families but also really powerful advocacy for thousands of young people right across the country as well.

So, thank you very much for your time today, very good luck and we will keep taking this forward.

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