



YOUNG MIGRANTS STANDING UP

WE BELONG



The Deintegration Generation

A report by We Belong -
Young Migrants Standing Up

Written by Fiona Bawdon,
November 2021

About We Belong

We Belong was set up in 2019 by co-CEOs Chrisann Jarrett and Dami Makinde, having evolved out of Let us Learn – the earlier campaign by Just for Kids Law. We Belong is the first UK-wide campaign organisation to be run by and for young migrants. We work with young people who migrated to the UK as children and are still subject to Home Office control, despite having grown up here. We campaign for equal access to higher education, and reform of the 10-year limited leave to remain (LLR) process that blights so many young lives on the long route to achieving settlement in the UK. We also aim to create future leaders, by providing information, support and training. Dami stood down as co-CEO in September 2021 to return to education, and Chrisann remains as sole CEO. www.welbelong.org.uk

About the author

Fiona Bawdon is We Belong’s communications consultant, and author of two of its previous reports (Normality is a Luxury in 2019; and Mental Health Check, in 2020). She is a journalist and researcher, and has worked with young migrants with insecure immigration status since the launch of Let us Learn in 2015. In 2014, she wrote Chasing Status: If not British, then what am I?, the first report to reveal the impact of Home Office hostile environment policies on the children of Windrush-generation migrants to the UK.

Thank you

This report was made possible thanks to the candour and courage of young migrants who were willing to share their experiences of limited leave to remain and the impact it has on their lives. Whether you are quoted by name or by pseudonym, we want to acknowledge you and thank you.

Thanks to Vanessa Hughes for kindly allowing us to quote from her dissertation (see below).

A special mention must go to We Belong’s outreach officer, Kimberly Garande, who conducted many of the interviews on which this report is based with such professionalism and sensitivity.

About We Belong’s Deintegration Generation report

The Deintegration Generation should be read as an addendum to our earlier reports, which catalogue the myriad ways that LLR isolates, stigmatises, and impoverishes young people, shattering their previously held certainties about identity and ‘Britishness’. It is based on formal and informal interviews with young migrants, which were carried out with members of We Belong and Let us Learn, from 2015 to date: principally, Mental Health Check¹ (MHC) (2020); and Normality is a Luxury² (NIAL) (2019). It also includes material from (and interviews undertaken for) Fiona Bawdon’s essay, ‘Remember when Windrush was still just the name of a ship?’ (Citizenship in Times of Turmoil, Elgar, 2019), plus other interviews she conducted. We drew on details from Dami Makinde’s witness statements prepared for the 2021 legal challenge to LLR being brought, with We Belong’s support, by Islington Law Centre. We also quote material from Vanessa Hughes’ unpublished PhD dissertation, ‘Young people subject to immigration control in London: Precarious lives’ (Goldsmiths, UoL, 2020), which was based on interviews with young migrants involved with We Belong and its predecessor, Let us Learn. Some of the names used are pseudonyms. Ages and personal details correct at the time of interview.

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1 <https://www.welbelong.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/WB%20mental%20health%20report.pdf>

2 <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c459ab1f2e6b156c9342d0a/t/5d09f90d10395e0001d7df4f/1560934675559/NIAL-Final.pdf>

Welcome to We Belong's Deintegration Generation report



Chrisann Jarrett
Founder and CEO
of We Belong

“ LLR forces young people into a continuous state of having to prove their right to receive services and opportunities.”

We Belong was set up to share the truth about the impact of limited leave to remain (LLR), which moves young people out of step with their peers: disrupting and limiting their ambitions, educational attainment, and opportunities. As a result, as this report highlights, LLR makes it all but impossible for young migrants to feel fully part of the country where they have grown up and call home, undoing years of integration in the process. In the nine years since the inception of LLR, thousands and thousands of young migrants have entered young adulthood under its shadow: **we are calling these young migrants the Deintegration Generation.**

The granting of LLR by the Home Office gives a young person the legal right to live, work, and participate in UK society, albeit with certain limitations. It is our experience that in practice (against a backdrop of the hostile environment), LLR does the opposite. It causes both individuals and institutions to react with suspicion, and forces young people into a continuous state of having to prove their right to receive services and opportunities.

The Windrush Scandal sent shockwaves through the We Belong community. Our members had to come to terms with the fact that any person in the UK with a migrant background could be suspected, mistreated, and removed by the government. Since 2018, the Home Office has taken a number of steps to try to

avoid similar injustices in future and increased its engagement with civil society. We Belong has worked hard to champion young people on the 10-year LLR route to settlement and to shine a light on the precarity of this ‘temporary’ immigration status, which ironically is granted only to those who can show the Home Office they already have ‘strong ties’ to the UK.

When We Belong was set up, one of our key campaign aims was to convince the Home Office to make the process fairer and more affordable to young people, by introducing a five-year route to permanent status. As we were putting the finishing touches to this report in late October 2021, we had confirmation that, in large part, our campaigning has been successful. The Home Office published what it calls a ‘Concession to the family Immigration Rules³’, although we like to think of it as more of a correction, which will allow many of the young people we work with to qualify for permanent status after five years. The final details of the new policy are still being discussed, but as we said in our statement welcoming this change,⁴ it will enable more young migrants to live full and productive lives, benefitting not just them but their families, and our whole society.

None of We Belong’s campaigning has been easy for what is a small and still embryonic organisation, run by young people starting out in their careers, while being themselves burdened by LLR. At every stage, even when change looked impossible, we have led with our values and created an open dialogue between young people and parliamentarians, civil servants, and (to date) two immigration ministers. Our campaigning will continue because this policy ▶

3 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1028126/Concession_on_longer_periods_of_leave_and_ILR.pdf

4 <https://twitter.com/WeBelong19/status/1452962027127902213/photo/1>

change will only go so far. However welcome, a move to a five-year route still leaves young people facing punishingly high immigration application fees – and there is no sign that our government plans to reverse the increases of recent years (a 331% rise since 2014).

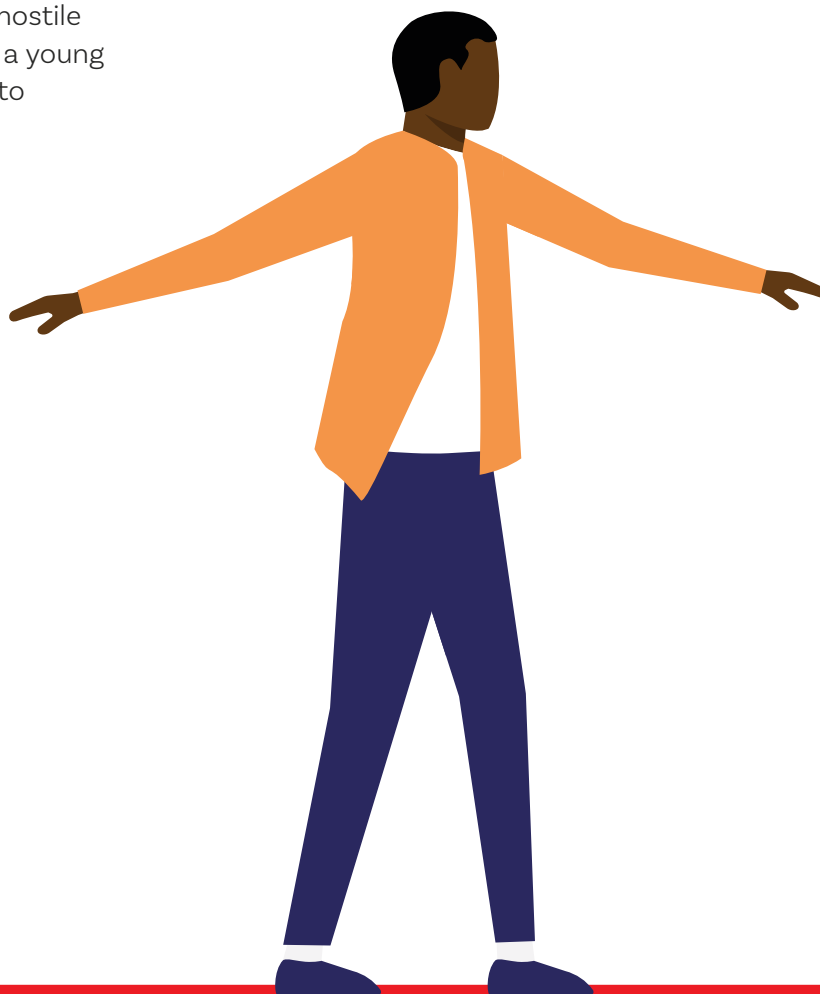
A record number of fee waivers for LLR applicants has been granted during the pandemic, but there is no certainty that this fairer approach will continue. We call on the government to commit to meaningful reform, to ensure that no young people are priced out of permanent status, and denied the acceptance, reassurance and recognition it brings.

We believe this change in policy is testimony to the fact we have been listened to in good faith by the Home Office, but there is still more to do. This report – our third in three years – details how, through LLR, the ‘tentacles’ of the hostile environment reach into every aspect of a young migrant’s life: from family to education to employment to mental health.

The Home Office may be working to take a more humane approach – to ‘see the face behind the case’ – but that will make little difference to the day-to-day lives of young people with LLR, who will still be at the mercy of the professionals and institutions that have been co-opted to enforce the hostile environment. These gatekeepers will continue to misunderstand and be suspicious of LLR, and continue to err in their decision-making. Until this changes, young migrants remain at risk of unfairness and discrimination, and we will still be made to feel like outsiders.

Whatever the Home Office says, the legacy of its hostile environment endures, which is why there will be no let up in the work of We Belong and other civil society organisations until real change happens.

November 2021



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STOP PRESS

This report was written before the Home Office announced plans in October 2021 to reform limited leave to remain in line with We Belong’s campaign aims, to give some young migrants a 5-year path to settlement.

Background: Nearly 10 years of LLR; 2 years of We Belong



Fiona Bawdon

Journalist, researcher, and
comms consultant, We Belong

As We Belong celebrates the second anniversary of its launch, we are just a few months away from marking almost a decade since the introduction of ‘limited leave to remain’ (LLR) – the precarious and ‘temporary’ immigration status held by nearly all of the young migrants we work with.

LLR was introduced in July 2012. Next year, the young people that were among the first to apply – and have managed to stay the 10-year course – will finally be eligible to apply for indefinite leave to remain (ILR). Only then will they be officially accepted as permanently settled in the UK – although they will have to wait another year, and pay another substantial fee, before being eligible for British citizenship.

When the current changes to the Immigration Rules for family migration were introduced, the government stated that ILR, or ‘settlement’, is not an entitlement, but must be earned by ‘compliance with the rules’, and ‘*promote integration and participation in British society [emphasis added].*’⁵

“In our experience, rather than promoting integration as the government intended, the 10-year LLR path to settlement does the opposite.”

The nine years that the current rules have been in place has been more than long enough for We Belong (and others) to document the toll LLR takes on young migrants’ lives. We have seen how the harm it causes increases with each year a young person is on this path. That is why we are calling on the government to mark next year’s 10th anniversary of LLR by replacing it with a shorter, more affordable, and more humane path to settlement for young people.

As well as marking We Belong’s second anniversary, this report also heralds a moment of significant change within the organisation. Co-founder and co-CEO Dami Makinde is stepping down to follow her long-deferred ambition of studying for a degree, and co-founder Chrisann Jarrett will continue to lead We Belong as sole CEO.

Like so many other ambitious young migrants, Dami’s original plans to go to university straight from school were derailed when she discovered her immigration status meant she was ineligible for a student loan. (It is worth noting that, if the Supreme Court had ruled in favour of the government in the 2015 Tigere legal challenge, Dami would still have another three years to wait before qualifying for student finance.)

2021 is a significant year for We Belong’s co-founders in other ways, too: Dami got married and bought a house, while the time finally came for Chrisann, now 26, to start preparing to become a citizen of the country she has called home since she was eight years old. Despite having lived here for nearly two decades (and ►

spending hours revising), Chrisann was intensely nervous as she took her Life in the UK test, which she needed to pass if she is to become a citizen (she recalls: ‘my heart was really pounding’). The fear Chrisann felt was a powerful reminder that the relentless pressure on young migrants never lets up, even when the end of their immigration journey is potentially in sight.

‘I do’ – but only if the Home Office says I can

For Dami, meanwhile, this year has brought great change in her personal life. However, even as she prepared to get married and to buy her first home, she discovered new ways in which her life is shaped by her ‘temporary’ immigration status. Despite living in the UK since age 9, she needed Home Office permission to marry her long-term partner; and (as her mortgage broker explained) because she has LLR, most mainstream lenders would not give them a mortgage, even though her husband is a British citizen and they had a significant deposit.

Legal challenge

One of Dami’s most important last tasks before leaving We Belong and finally continuing her education was to provide detailed evidence to support Islington Law Centre’s legal challenge to LLR, brought on behalf of the young people it represents. Her witness statements catalogue multiple examples of how LLR has blighted and disrupted young migrants’ lives, including the case of JE.

JE (who was 3 when he arrived in the UK) clearly met the eligibility criteria for a student loan to study for a degree. Yet his student finance application was repeatedly refused, which left him in significant debt and unable to pay his university fees. The mistake took many hours of his, his solicitor’s and We Belong’s time, before it was rectified, and many months before he was eventually awarded the loan to which he was entitled.

 [Read JE’s story on page 20.](#)

As I write, the High Court is due to hear the legal challenge in January 2022⁶.

One slip and you’re out

As we were assembling this briefing in August 2021, it was given added impetus by press reports that the government was planning mass deportations to Jamaica of people with criminal convictions, after they had completed prison sentences. Some of those facing removal had reportedly arrived in the UK as young as age 3 months⁷, while one had served a 14-month sentence for drug offences some 10 years previously⁸.

So far as we know, this is not an issue directly affecting any We Belong members or their families – but hearing about the forced removal of people who have grown up in the UK has a chilling effect on this cohort nonetheless. (In a similar vein, Normality is a Luxury reported how the Windrush scandal had left young migrants ‘scared’ for themselves and ‘shocked’ at the government’s treatment of people who have spent many decades in the UK. As interviewee Andrew said in 2019: ‘If they could do that to a British citizen, what could they do to me?’)

Evidence from We Belong’s Mental Health Check shows how these kinds of widely-publicised removals send shudders through migrant communities, weighing heavily on those who have never been convicted of any crime. Young people say they are left feeling ‘disposable’ or ‘expendable’.

Speaking in 2020, in response to reports of earlier forced removals, Zara said: ‘You feel you’re not really valued in any way apart from what you are able to pay. If you don’t have a criminal record, then you’re “good” and we can give [LLR] to you, but obviously if you’re not [it’s] “sorry, bye, get on the next plane. Go back to where you came from”. So you don’t really feel like they value you as a person.’ ▶

 [Read Zara’s story on page 32.](#)

6 The legal challenge argues that the policy of only granting ILR in very exceptional cases to young people on the 10-year LLR route is not rationally justified and may create a disproportionate interference with Article 8 ECHR, private life, for young people who came to the UK as children and whose future lies in the UK.

7 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-58177487>

8 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/aug/05/outcry-over-plan-to-deport-jamaican-nationals-who-came-to-uk-as-children>

Young migrants worried about ‘making a slip’ – however unlikely or out of character it might be for them – and ending up with a criminal conviction that would carry more weight than decades of living in, and contributing to, the UK. For example, one described feeling scared she might be arrested and threatened with removal when she drove her car to a garage after the MOT had lapsed.

Another interviewee, Seyi, feared being stopped by police while all his paperwork was with the Home Office as he waited for his LLR renewal to be processed. He said: ‘Just going out, coming back from work, you’re scared if you get stopped before you have your leave and you have nothing to show. Even though all they have to do is a simple search [with the Home Office], how would they do that on the street? Would they have to just take you to a police station?’ ■

September 2021



1. Findings: Introduction

by Fiona Bawdon

A decade of deintegration

Every time I typed ‘deintegration’ during the writing of this report, my computer’s autocorrect tried to change it to ‘reintegration’. Online dictionaries also don’t recognise the word and suggest the alternatives ‘disintegration’ or ‘denigration’. In We Belong’s experience, it isn’t only computers that fail to understand the word deintegration: many of our political leaders are equally oblivious, even though this is precisely the impact their immigration and education policies are having on young migrants growing up in the UK.

While politicians may lack awareness, the concept of deintegration is well recognised by academics here and in the US. They have a variety of terms to describe the prolonged period of limbo that many migrants face before being eligible for settled status in the countries that are their home, such as: ‘permanent temporariness’; ‘waithood’; a ‘temporal straitjacket’.

According to figures published by the Migration Observatory, in March 2021 there were 170,000 people in the UK with LLR, most of them hailing from Commonwealth countries. From 2016 to 2020, half of those granted LLR were from Nigeria, Pakistan, India, Ghana and Bangladesh. The estimated number of children and young people living in the UK in 2017 without settled status – which would include those with LLR – was 332,000, according to figures published by the Mayor of London in 2020.⁹

“The more times that young people go through the LLR application process, the more they tend to feel unsafe and unsettled.”

Among that number are many young migrants who have grown up in the UK, and only discover they are not officially recognised as permanent residents when they are on the brink of adulthood.

These are among the migrants that We Belong supports. Young people in this situation have their own descriptions for how it feels living with LLR: a rollercoaster; a tightrope (‘just hoping not to fall’); a game of snakes and ladders, where there are only snakes; like holding your breath; being on probation; an itch you can’t scratch; a rigged system; doing a jigsaw with no picture to follow; a rupture of our identity. In her dissertation, Vanessa Hughes records that the mother of one We Belong member’ calls her the ‘waiting girl’.

LLR is, in the main, granted to people on the basis that they have family in the UK, or they have long-established links to this country. Logic might suggest that the longer that migrants have LLR, and as they accrue more years of living here, so their emotional ties to the UK and their sense of belonging would become deeper, stronger and more certain. Our evidence suggests, however, that people with LLR feel precisely the opposite.

‘Back to zero’

The more times that young people go through the LLR application process, the more they tend to feel unsafe and unsettled, as they have more to lose. In our experience, applicants are acutely aware that if they fail to renew on time, they will have to begin the 10-year process from the very beginning, something that happened to a friend of interviewee Jemma. Jemma says: ‘She had to start all over again. Back to zero. And she was already on eight years. It’s crazy!’ ▶

9 https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/final_londons_children_and_young_people_who_are_not_british_citizens.pdf

By the time the LLR finish line is in sight, feelings of belonging and previous certainties about being part of British society have been undermined. For young people who have struggled with the expense and complexity of maintaining their lawful status over so many years, citizenship feels less like a badge of recognition or a reward for their contribution to British society, and more like something they are buying, at great financial, emotional and practical cost.

As Michael, 27 (who arrived in the UK age 8), says: 'There is no value in it. It's just a piece of paper that I paid for.'

'I want everybody... to feel British'

Speaking in July 2019, during his campaign to become leader of the Conservative Party, Boris Johnson said: 'I want everybody who comes here and makes their lives here to be and to feel British; that is the most important thing.'

We quoted these words in our 2020 MHC report and repeat them here, because they encapsulate the mismatch between the political rhetoric about the government's desire for migrants to integrate and the actual impact of its immigration policies.

The same year that Johnson was campaigning for leadership, the institute created by one of his predecessors, Tony Blair, published a report¹⁰ claiming that 'failures around integration' were 'partly responsible' for a public reaction against migration. According to the report: 'Particularly now, when there is increasing evidence of far-right bigotry on the rise, it is important to establish the correct social contract around the rights and duties of citizens, including those who migrate to our country. In this report, we make it clear that there is a duty to integrate.'

What both our current and former prime ministers fail to acknowledge is that there are young migrants who grew up, in Johnson's words, 'feeling British', who then lose that sense of identity and belonging as a result of immigration policies such as LLR. We Belong's

evidence shows how they are left feeling stigmatised and isolated from their British peers directly as a result of their experience of LLR.

As Anwar, 25, a student teacher who arrived in the UK age 9, says: 'I don't feel like a migrant because of the people and the support network I have around me. But then you have to deal with all the paperwork and that's when you realise: OK, I'm not the same as everyone else. There is a segregation thing going on.'

The interviews here and our earlier reports show how migrants who had not questioned their place in the UK as younger children, increasingly did so as they became young adults, and developed a greater understanding of the LLR process, and experienced the pressures and uncertainty that go with it. Michelle, 26, says: 'No one really differentiates you when you're a kid. I started to feel the effects of it when I turned 18.'

How LLR hurts the vulnerable and the ambitious

The high cost and restrictions associated with LLR mean it takes a particularly heavy toll on migrants who have characteristics that could limit their earning potential, as well as those with high educational and career ambitions.

Speaking at a Let us Learn event in Westminster in 2018, Ola, a young man with limited mobility, told the audience that his medical condition means he can only work part-time, 'making it impossible for me to save up for the fees I will need to renew my leave to remain'.¹¹ The cost of LLR has increased by over £1,000 since then.

Ola questioned why a generation of young people were being condemned to an 'uncertain, unstable and unfulfilled' life, saying: 'We've made our life here. This is our home. We are part of this country and have a stake in it.' He added: 'There are many young people in my position who are going to achieve incredible things. Some will be scientists, some maybe even be astronauts. But we aren't all going to be superheroes. I don't want to be extraordinary all the time. Some of us aspire to do normal things and live normal lives.' ▶

10 The Glue That Binds: Integration in a Time of Populism, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, April 2019.

11 'Remember when Windrush was still just the name of a ship?' Fiona Bawdon; Citizenship in Times of Turmoil, Elgar, 2019.

As Ola suggested, young people who have the ambition to ‘achieve incredible things’ are often disproportionately affected by the restrictions and complexity inherent in having LLR. These include not just would-be ‘scientists and astronauts’, or aspiring doctors and lawyers (of which We Belong knows many), but those whose talents lie in non-academic areas. Michael (who came to the UK from Uganda age 3) missed out on a football scholarship in America, and ‘sat in his bedroom for 18 months’, waiting for the Home Office to process his LLR application; Samuel was offered a place to do an acting BA, but found he wasn’t eligible for a student loan; while JE (see page, 20), a budding sports mentor, feared he would have to drop out of university after he was wrongly refused student finance.

University students with LLR are not on a level playing field with their British peers. These include Cynthia, who was ineligible for a student loan and worked 40 hours a week during term time; and Agnes, who funded herself through her physics degree at Manchester University, by a combination of crowdfunding and two part-time jobs. The work commitments limited the extent to which she could engage in university life, compared with other students. She says: ‘I went to a networking event. You can join all these societies, and I was starting to think, what time do I have to dedicate to these things that I know I should be joining?’

Agnes struggled to fund her studies, even though Manchester University agreed to charge her ‘home student’ fees, rather than the much higher international rates. But not all universities are so understanding. Many insist on charging international fees to anyone who does not meet the government’s definition of home student. For example, Emmanuel was charged fees of £26,000 a year by Imperial College. He was able to take up his place to study chemistry thanks only to a substantial scholarship and a successful crowdfunding campaign. In We Belong’s experience, Emmanuel is the exception rather than the rule: scholarships that extend to cover international fees are rare. Typically, if a university declines to offer home fees, this

ends a student’s chance of higher education, as the sums are unaffordable to them and their families. This happened to Zara, who was forced to drop out just two weeks’ into her first term, after learning she would have to pay international fees (see page 32); meanwhile, Mariam, who refuses to give up on her ambition to be a surgeon, started her medical studies in autumn 2021, and now faces the prospect of having to self-fund international level fees of up to £40,000 a year¹² (see page 14).

Even where young migrants are eligible for a student loan, they often face greater financial pressure than their peers. These loans often have to cover not just their university living costs but also their LLR fees (currently equating to £86 a month). Some students also have to contribute towards the LLR costs of family members who cannot work until their status is resolved. Furthermore, those who have been out of education for several years (as they wait to qualify for student finance) are often expected to complete a foundation year before beginning their further studies. However beneficial this is academically, the additional year increases their student debt and puts them even further behind their peers, many of whom will have graduated and joined the job market by this stage.

‘Genuine inclusivity’

The 2021 Independent Report by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities¹³ was set up by prime minister Johnson in response to the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, and identified four overarching aims, including achieving ‘genuine inclusivity to ensure all groups feel a part of UK society’.

If the government is sincere about promoting ‘genuine inclusivity’ and ensuring everyone who has grown up in the UK feels ‘a part of UK society’, we call on it to reform LLR as a matter of urgency and give young migrants a shorter, fairer, and more certain path to settlement in the country they call home. ■

12 <https://uk.gofundme.com/f/help-mariam-become-a-future-surgeon>

13 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-report-of-the-commission-on-race-and-ethnic-disparities/foreword-introduction-and-full-recommendations>

LIMITED LEAVE TO REMAIN EXPLAINED

- Limited leave to remain (LLR) is a form of 'temporary' status, granted to people with family life and/or strong ties to the UK (including many who have grown up here).
- There are an estimated 332,000 children and young people in the UK without 'settled' status.
- LLR must be reapplied for every 30 months, or it lapses and a young person becomes 'unlawful'. They would then have to start the 10-year process again from scratch.
- Each LLR application costs £2,593 (including Home Office fees and the Immigration Health Surcharge) – up 331% since 2014. (Fee waivers are available in some circumstances.)
- Once young people are 18, they have to make separate LLR applications from the rest of their family.
- Only after 10 years, and 4 consecutive, precisely-timed LLR applications, can young people apply for 'settlement', known as indefinite leave to remain (ILR). A year after that, they can finally apply for British citizenship. ILR costs £2,389. Citizenship costs £1,330. (No fee waivers are available.)
- Young people with LLR can face barriers to higher education. Unless they can provide detailed proof of having lived in the UK half their life, and have held LLR for 3 years before the start of their course, they will be categorised as 'international students' and blocked from student finance. University tuition fees payable by international students are not capped, and can be as high as £40,000 a year for some courses. ■



CASE STUDY 1

Tripped up by rigid rules

Michelle, 26, arrived in the UK from Nigeria, age 11. She is studying psychology at a Russell Group university.

Michelle's LLR application was refused because, unwittingly, she had applied just a few weeks before she met the Home Office's stringent 'half of life' rule. Although it took the Home Office a year to send its rejection – by which time she obviously met the criteria – she still had to reapply, and pay the fee again.

Michelle explains: 'I just thought "half your life" meant if you came here when you were 11, when you're 22 you can apply. I didn't know they meant down to the day you arrived here.' She spent the year waiting for a response, worrying and checking on her application's status almost daily.

To avoid hefty legal fees, Michelle had made her application through a lawyer who was a friend rather than an immigration specialist, and when the Home Office eventually responded, the letter was sent to the lawyer's office address. 'One day I checked, and it said "your application has been dispatched". [The lawyer] said "I will go into the office and check."' By the afternoon, the lawyer hadn't called but Michelle was still hoping her application was granted: 'There's no way they're going to reject me. I met the rules; I know it.'

Her mother arrived home and said the lawyer was on his way over. 'He came to the house and he said they rejected it. I had to wait for him to go and wait for my mum to leave the room, and then I was like "What am I going to do?" I thought my life was over. I was so depressed I cried for a whole day. I read the letter so many times and was like: but why?' She adds: 'I was thinking about the money that I lost. Do you think that money was easy to get?'

Some time afterwards, Michelle was put in touch with an immigration lawyer offering free initial consultations. 'He told me: "You just didn't apply at the right time. You applied too early. If you were to apply now, they will definitely give it to you."' His fee for submitting Michelle's new application would be £6,000, far more than she could afford. Instead, she decided to do the application herself, but rather than face another long wait to hear back, she saved up to pay for the Home Office's premium service. 'I said to myself, it's very risky, but I think I'm going to do it. So I did it: I did the application and did everything myself.'

Using the Home Office's in-person premium service brought its own anxieties, however. 'I was shaking in the waiting room. I thought, what if this doesn't come out now? Are they going to arrest me right here? Am I going back to Nigeria today?'

This time, her application was granted. 'Luckily, it came out fine and I literally just started crying in the middle of the office. The lady started looking at me like she didn't understand.' ■

"I thought "half your life" meant, if you came here age 11, when you're 22 you can apply. I didn't know they meant down to the day you arrived here."

CASE STUDY 2

Taking on a Herculean challenge

Mariam, 24, arrived in the UK from Nigeria, age 15. She is studying medicine at Plymouth University.

Mariam came to the UK at 15 to join her mother and brother in east London after the death of her grandmother, whom she'd lived with in Nigeria. As her grandmother had grown older, Mariam found she was caring for her grandmother, rather than the other way around – an experience that sparked her interest in medicine and made her determined to be the first doctor in her family.

Gradually, Mariam settled into her new life in the UK, made friends at school and did well in her GCSEs and A-levels. 'The sciences are my favourite subject,' she says. However, it took her five exhausting years of repeated applications to the Home Office before she was finally granted LLR. During this period, she was legally barred from working or studying after she finished her secondary education. She kept as busy and motivated as she could by volunteering, joining the We Belong board of trustees¹⁴, and helping her mother and helping at her church.

When Mariam's LLR was finally granted in October 2020, she was determined to make up for lost time. The day her Home Office biometric card arrived – the first day she was legally allowed to work – she applied to become a healthcare assistant to gain useful work experience. She had already started applying to medical school. (Incidentally, Mariam has also inspired her mother, who is a nursing assistant, to study for a degree and qualify as a nurse.)

Entry to medical school is very competitive, and Mariam had been out of education for five years by that stage, so she was delighted to be offered a place at Plymouth University. The

course appeared tailor-made for her situation, as it included a foundation year and was aimed at 'able students whose education has been impacted by adversity'¹⁵.

“Whether Mariam can stay at medical school will depend on ceaseless crowdfunding, working every hour she can, and successfully applying for scholarships.”

Having assumed she was eligible for student finance because of her mother's British citizenship (her brother is also British), Mariam was disappointed to find out the complex rules meant this was not the case. Student Finance England considers her an international student, meaning she does not qualify for funding.

After careful reflection, Mariam decided she could not give up on her dream of becoming a surgeon, and decided to fund her own way. This would entail a combination of using savings from her earnings as a healthcare assistant and from a second, catering job, plus crowdfunding for donations from people sympathetic to her predicament.

She had just launched her crowdfunding page when Mariam suffered another blow. Plymouth University informed her it was also categorising her as an international student. Rather than home student fees of £9,250 a year, she would have to pay considerably more - with her annual tuition fees rising to nearly £40,000 during the last three years of the six-year course. ▶

¹⁴ <https://www.webelong.org.uk/about-us/our-team/our-trustees>

¹⁵ <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/courses/undergraduate/bmbs-bachelor-of-medicine-bachelor-of-surgery-with-foundation-year-0>

Adding living costs on top of this, these sums would have deterred even the most determined person – but not Mariam. After a plea to the head of Plymouth medical school, the university agreed she could pay home fees for her foundation year. This concession was all the encouragement Mariam needed to decide to forge ahead as she had originally planned. She moved to Plymouth to start her course in September 2021 and is now officially a medical student.

Whether Mariam can stay the course will depend on ceaseless crowdfunding efforts, working every hour she can, and successfully applying for scholarships – none of which is easy or certain. All will take incredible amounts of time, energy and emotional reserves, and will have to be fitted in around the already significant demands of her medical studies. By any measure, it will be a Herculean (some might say, Sisyphean), task.

Mariam acknowledges the scale of the challenge but feels she has no choice but to keep going. ‘My life, for as long as I have known it, has been me living in a state of uncertainty,’ she says. ‘Now that I have more to lose, I have no choice but to continue living it.’ ■



2. Findings: How LLR causes deintegration

“I grew more distant from that British identity. The 10-year route really triggered those feelings.”

We Belong’s experience with young migrants reveals how, in a matter of months, the demands and uncertainty of the LLR process can reverse years, even decades, of integration. These young people, who have grown up in the UK and attended school fully in step with their peers, describe how LLR makes them feel like ‘outsiders’ as they reach young adulthood.

Anu, 24, who was born in the UK, says LLR left her ‘struggling to identify as British’. She says: ‘I grew more distant from that British identity. The 10-year route really triggered those feelings.’ She describes LLR as having ‘so many tentacles that impact so many areas of my life’. The repeated renewals are ‘literal reminders that I don’t belong here’.

Gabriel King, 20, who arrived in the UK age 11, likens the repeated applications to ‘investing another two-and-a-half years in a land that, next time you have to renew, can just reject you and say: “This is not your home.”’ David, 21, who arrived in the UK age 9, says his most recent application ‘brought me back to reality and reminded me that I am not like everyone else’.

For David, the renewals are a reminder ‘I’m not really safe... I’ve got to have my wits about me at all times’. It’s a sentiment shared by Gabriel King, whose advice is that no one with LLR should feel safe: ‘Be ready. Be cautious. Be smart. Don’t live your life in fear, but also be prepared. Just know that in a system like this, there isn’t any trust to be found.’

When Seyi, 24, was first granted LLR, he saw it as affirming his Britishness, having lived in the UK for 15 years. ‘Once you have that official document, then you know that you feel included and integrated,’ he recalls. His feelings of acceptance were rapidly undermined by having to renew after just 30 months. ‘In the renewal, I just felt like this country did not see me like that. No matter how much I’ve done. You know you’ve been a good worker. For me, it legit just ripped it apart. It opened my eyes.’

Zara, 19 (who arrived in the UK age 12), says: ‘I really wish I could say I was British.’ She adds: ‘Everything I’ve done is no different to any other person. I have the same A-level results. I have the same GCSEs. I’m as British as the next person down the road. I’m also not, because of that card, it says I’m Nigerian.’

Similarly, April, 24 (who arrived in the UK age 8), says: ‘From the age of 8 to almost 25 now, this [country] is all I’ve known – but this is also the place that is trying to push you out, in a sense. So you’re trying to fight so hard to stay in a country that you think you belong to, that you want to belong to, that you want to give back to in any way, shape or form that you can – but that country obviously doesn’t want you here.’

In an echo of Boris Johnson’s 2019 comments (cited in the introduction to this report), Michael, 22, grew up believing that ‘once you have assimilated with British culture, you’ve lived in a country, you’ve got friends here, you’ve got family here – you’re basically British’. His experience of LLR has since undermined this belief. ‘Maybe no matter how hard I work, no matter how much I assimilate, maybe I’ll always be seen as an outsider.’ ▶

For young migrants in their early 20s who have lived half their life in the UK, having to wait the same amount of time again – another decade – before they are officially accepted into the UK is disproportionately long. Seyi believes five years should be enough to be ‘trialled as a citizen’ to ‘see if this person is actually serious about being here’. He says: ‘How can you trial someone for 10 years? It doesn’t make sense.’

Young applicants see the level of LLR fees and the rate at which they have increased (331% since 2014) as deliberately punitive and even exploitative. Jemma says: ‘Government just treats us like a source of income. I think that’s the most difficult part for me.’ Adding: ‘They’re so horrible to foreign-born people.’

Seyi characterises the government’s attitude as ‘we don’t want to welcome you into our society, but we want your money’. By increasing the fees so steeply, politicians are ‘trying to set people up to fail’, he says.

Michelle, 26 (who arrived in the UK age 11), says: ‘I don’t feel part of this culture and the country because of the status that I have, but the way I speak is obviously a huge part of my identity so people just assume that I’m from here. I don’t like to correct them because there is a stigma that comes from being an immigrant. But then I have this duty to make people more aware, so it’s conflicting. I’m stuck in limbo; I don’t know where I fit in; I don’t know how to describe my identity because of the situation.’

‘I made a conscious effort to fit in’

Most of the young migrants We Belong works with arrived in the UK as children. For them, the deintegration they experience as they enter adulthood is particularly devastating as they remember their initial struggle to fit in and adapt to their new environment.

For Matthew, 27, his arrival at the age of 8 was like being ‘asked to absorb into a culture that you don’t know’, he says. ‘Your name that you’re used to [is changed], you have to use an English name now. Everything is a kind of pretence, to fit in.’ When Michelle arrived, her Nigerian accent marked her out from her classmates. ‘I made a conscious effort to fit in so I didn’t stick out or be bullied,’ she says.

By the time they become adults, however, most are so assimilated into British society they no longer even identify themselves as migrants. In her dissertation, Vanessa Hughes describes the young migrants she interviewed (age 18-25) as ‘leading a life of relative normalcy, especially at school and in their local neighbourhoods, indistinguishable from other young Londoners’.

The way these young people see themselves, and are seen by their teachers, friends, neighbours, and local communities, is in sharp contrast to the way they are regarded and categorised by the Home Office and other government departments.

‘International’ students and ‘temporary’ migrants

For Anu, LLR’s repeated renewals are ‘literal reminders’ that in law she doesn’t belong in the UK. There are other, more visceral, reminders of the outsider status of young migrants who have LLR, too. These include being denied ‘home student’ status, and being described by politicians as ‘temporary’ migrants.

i. Blocked from university access

In 2012, legislation was introduced that made anyone with LLR ineligible for a government-funded student loan, regardless of how long they had lived in the UK. The 2015 Supreme Court case of *Tigere* (to which We Belong’s predecessor organisation, Let us Learn, gave evidence) ameliorated the situation for some young people with LLR, but not all.

Since then, We Belong has been contacted by hundreds of young migrants (or by parents and teachers on their behalf), who have been told they are ‘international’ rather than home students, despite having lived in the UK for their formative years. Most initially assume what they are being told must be a mistake and are left shaken, confused and frustrated to find that no mistake has been made in their case.

For Ijeoma, who arrived in the UK age 2, it was shattering to her identity. And, rather than be stigmatised, Zeno – who funded herself through university paying international fees – hid her ‘international’ status from her fellow students. ‘I used to pretend I’d got student finance: “Student finance is so rubbish, right?”’ she recalls. ▶

The financial consequences of the ‘international’ student label are as damaging as the emotional ones. It means young people cannot access a government-funded student loan, and their annual tuition fees are not capped at £9,250 (international fees can be several times higher). At best, educational plans are delayed; at worst, they are irrevocably derailed.

Yousif lost his university place due to his LLR status, which left him hurt and bewildered. ‘You just get blocked and turned away – even though you’ve lived in this society and are expected to be part of it.’

Matthew was also left disaffected, after having ‘worked hard in high school and in college, so that I could go to uni’. He says: ‘When those things don’t come to pass the way you want it, you look down upon the system that is supposedly supposed to be working for you.’

Many interviewees come from families where education is highly prized, with parents that have low-wage jobs making significant financial sacrifices to ensure their children can go to university. Zeno says the decision was made for her: ‘My parents were like, “you are going. There is no choice”. [The question] was how are we going to pay for that, not whether we should.’ This was despite the burden of the family’s Home Office fees, and Zeno having to pay international fees for her psychology degree.

Kelly recounts that her mum sold the family home, in part to cover the costs of her university studies. The family have been in rented accommodation ever since.

ii. Taxed twice

In 2015 – just three years after legislation categorising many of them as international students – the government increased the pressure on young people with LLR by introducing the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS), an additional fee that has to be paid with each LLR application and renewal, along with Home Office fees.

The IHS now adds £1,560 to the cost of each LLR application (the £462 annual cost is rolled up and has to be paid in 30-month chunks, in advance). As well as being difficult to afford, it is seen as inherently unfair by young people whose families have been working and contributing to the cost of the NHS through their taxes, sometimes for decades. Matthew describes it as a ‘double tax’ on those like him who are already ‘paying the taxes of the land’. He adds: ‘Things like that are an insult to a person who is genuinely contributing to society.’

The IHS cost puts a significant additional drain on migrant families’ financial resources that: are already depleted by Home Office fees; are denied recourse to public funds (including in-work benefits and free childcare); and are sometimes self-funding university costs at international rates. As a result, for at least a decade, young people from LLR families have been living more restricted and less financially secure lives than their peers, even compared with those from families doing similar jobs and with similar levels of earnings.

Speaking in 2018 about plans to double the annual cost of the IHS, then-immigration minister Caroline Nokes MP described the charge as applying to ‘temporary migrants’, who would pay it to use the NHS ‘during their stay’¹⁶. A press release from the Department of Health and Social Care that month was headed: ‘Health charge for temporary migrants will increase to £400 a year.’¹⁷ (The cost of the IHS was subsequently increased again, to the current level of £624 a year.)

This doubling of the IHS was described by some media outlets as ‘a climbdown’¹⁸ by government, as the Conservative Party 2017 manifesto had pledged to triple the cost, as a way of tackling what it described as ‘health tourism’.

For young people with LLR, hearing their supposed ‘temporary’ status cited as justification for imposing the IHS charge, or being associated with health tourism, was ►

16 <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2018-10-11/HCW5995>

17 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/health-charge-for-temporary-migrants-will-increase-to-400-a-year>

18 <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/5499957/health-tourism-doubled-nhs-pm-pledge/>

another blow to their sense of belonging to this country. The IHS thus differentiates young people from their non-migrant peers: they feel they are, once again, being defined by and judged on their immigration status, rather than the lives they have built in the UK. Speaking in 2020 – by which time Britain had been his home for 15 years – Seyi had taken to describing himself as ‘temporary’. ‘They basically made me feel like I’m just a Nigerian living in the UK. Ever since then, I always tell people, “I’m Nigerian but I’m just here temporarily”.’

British values?

‘What I love about this country is the people,’ says Matthew. He describes as ‘fantastic’ the UK’s core values of ‘democracy, freedom of speech, the ability to protest and litigate against laws’.

Yousif, 22, who has lived here for half his life, also admires and shares British values. However, like other interviewees, he believes that in its treatment of young migrants like him, the government does not always live up to those values. Yousif feels accepted by British people, but not by the government. ‘I feel like I am a part of British society – but it’s just the immigration system that does not want you to be a part of British society. They just see you as a liar,’ he says.

By contrast, Seyi believes in its hostile treatment of migrants, the Home Office is ‘acting like the voice for the country’.

April says although political leaders claim to be anti-racist and pro-integration, it is the government she fears more than people who are overtly racist. ‘The racists can talk as much as they want to, but they don’t have that impact on my life that the government does. The government can strip me of my LLR, and I’ll be undocumented again, and not be able to work; not be able to do anything; I won’t be able to survive.’

Matthew’s faith in Britain had been shaken by his experience of LLR and treatment by the Home Office. ‘You just stop believing in the core values of this country. “Freedom to; freedom to; freedom to” – I needed “freedom from”, and the government was causing that.’ As a result, he ‘can never feel fully patriotic’.

Many young migrants, whose schools told them that studying hard was the key to shaping their own futures, are disillusioned when they discover good grades are not necessarily enough to attain a university place. Gabriel King says: ‘You are served the story of “be a good citizen. Work hard”. Especially being a Black man, or Black boy at that time. You are told you need to really work extra hard to get what you want. But when you’ve done that, and the system tells you: “Hey, you cannot go further than this because you don’t have the right documents”, you stop believing in the system.’

It is this mismatch between what these young people understand to be British values – playing fair, rewarding hard work, equal treatment – and their experiences as young adults that triggers deintegration, and causes them to question their place in this country. ■

CASE STUDY 3

Given the runaround by Student Finance

**JE, 21, arrived from Jamaica, age 3.
He is studying for a sport and rehabilitation therapy degree.**

JE has played football since he was 7, and his ambition is to be a sports mentor, ideally at a professional club. This led him to study for a sport and exercise science BTEC at sixth form college but for a while he was undecided whether to go to university or straight into full-time work. Eventually, JE chose higher education, but the decision was nearly negated by Student Finance England (SFE), which refused to recognise his eligibility for student finance.

JE says: 'I knew I met the criteria: I'd done my research.' He was also careful to apply for student finance in good time, knowing his mother's wages as a carer would not cover his fees and accommodation costs. However, it took from October to the following February before his money finally came through. It involved multiple interventions by JE, as well as his solicitor, Roopa Tanna - who was able to confirm his full immigration history - and We Belong outreach officer Kimberly Garande, who spent many hours on his case. 'It would definitely not have been resolved without them, and I would have dropped out of uni,' says JE.

Thanks to We Belong's previous work with SFE - aimed at avoiding cases like these - Kimberly was able to contact senior SFE staff to explain the problems JE was having. Even so, it still took five months for him to receive the money he was fully entitled to, during which time he was threatened with eviction from his student accommodation for non-payment of rent (a supportive friend had to lend him the money), and taken off the student roll by his university. While initially supportive, the university finally penalised him for the non-payment of his

fees, and shut him out of its online portal. Consequently, he missed a month of lectures and tutorials, including three assignment deadlines.

He says: 'At first, I didn't know what to do. I spoke to my mum and she said "you have to do your own revision. You have to find a way of still doing the work". My mum said "you will get finance", and Kimberly said the same. I asked someone I knew from lectures to send me the recordings. It was quite hard to catch up.' Despite such reassurances, the longer SFE refused his loan, the more anxious JE became. 'It caused quite a lot of havoc. If I didn't do the work, I would have wasted a whole year and all that money. I wasn't sure what I was doing: am I doing this for no reason if they are not going to let me study?'

JE contacted SFE multiple times, and was given different information depending on who he spoke to. 'Some would say yes, you should get student finance. Others would say they didn't know what to do. I thought, "if you don't know what to do, what are you doing working for them?'"

SFE continually asked for more proof of his time in the UK, which JE supplied: letters from school and college plus all the material he had previously sent to the Home Office in order to obtain LLR. Still SFE wasn't convinced. Its treatment left him 'very confused', he says. 'It's not like I was planning to leave the country. It would have been easier to get a visa than student finance.' ▶

“JE contacted Student Finance England multiple times, and was given different information depending on who he spoke to.”

In order to stay on the course, JE ‘needed financial help from everyone around me. It wasn’t nice at all’. He was as frugal as he could be, but the sums added up, increasing the pressure on him. ‘It really affected my mental health. I was worried about paying the money back. It’s quite different owing money to friends than to SFE, when you are investing in your future career.’

To his huge relief, in February 2021, JE received an email confirming his loan, and apologising for taking so long. His message now to SFE is: ‘Train your workers better so they stop putting people in situations they shouldn’t be in.’ And though JE refused to give up on his studies, he still missed out. ‘I didn’t make any friends in uni, I was distracted trying to sort out my student loan: what if I didn’t get to finish the year?’ he says.

No thanks to SFE, JE did finish his first year at university. Not only did he keep up with the work, but through his own efforts, he excelled. ‘I came out of this year with the equivalent of a first.’ ■



CASE STUDY 4

Penalised for being a high-achiever

Gabriel King, 20, arrived in the UK from Nigeria, age 11. He is studying politics at a Russell Group university.

Like many migrants who came to this country as young children, Gabriel King's understanding of his immigration status during his early years is limited. He believes he was granted status at 11, but at age 15 found himself 'in limbo', after his renewal was rejected by the Home Office. At that point, he says, 'things got complicated and I had to understand, because I was trying to tackle the issue'. It was only after bringing a legal challenge, age 17, against the Home Office – a process he describes as 'frustrating, confusing and unnecessarily expensive' – that his LLR was reinstated.

What struck Gabriel King most about facing the Home Office in court was the way in which its lawyer turned his achievements ('a history of volunteering, activism, youth politics, athletics, and very strong academic career, including city-wide awards') against him. The lawyer said this was evidence he could build a new life in Nigeria and so should be removed, rather than proof of his integration into the UK. On the same day as he was facing the Home Office in court, a year earlier, age 16, Gabriel King had been representing his home city in a debate at the UK Youth Parliament. Now, this and all his other achievements were being turned against him. He says it 'baffled me so much' that his academic successes and community involvement – 'the definition of good migrant' – were used as justification for forcing him to return to Nigeria, rather than making him an asset to the UK, who was welcome to live here.

Gabriel King recalls: 'The lawyer was saying the same skills will make me alright to survive in a country I haven't lived in for years. "You have nothing to really go back to, but you're resourceful. You can make a life out of it." That's the thing that got me. He said: "Clearly you are very resourceful and very good at what you do. This is how I know you will be OK to go back to Nigeria." I thought, how can you give me a compliment and at the same time dig me a grave? Statements like that make me very disappointed; I found that very sad and sickening. He understood how I'd been more than a contributor to this society.'

The judge agreed with Gabriel King, and his appeal was granted. ■

"The Home Office lawyer said his history of volunteering and academic success was evidence he could build a new life in Nigeria and so should be removed"

3. Findings: Impact on wider society

In the previous section of this report, we detail how the 10-year LLR route undermines years of integration into UK society and destroys young people's sense of belonging in and to the UK. This report follows on from our 2020 Mental Health Check, which catalogues the toll that LLR takes on young migrants' mental and physical health; and our 2019 report, Normality is a Luxury, where we show what Anu calls the 'tentacles' of LLR intruding into multiple aspects of young people's lives: destabilising families; draining resources; derailing education plans; and limiting career options.

As a frontline organisation devoted to supporting young migrants, We Belong believes our research clearly indicates that LLR is damaging the lives of young migrants and their families. Less well explored to date is how LLR's ripple effects are deleterious not just to these individuals, but also to wider British society. From our work, it is increasingly clear to us that the instability and onerous demands created by LLR serve nobody; certainly not employers, educators, or communities. Nor do they serve a government that truly prizes and seeks to promote social cohesion and diversity, and that aims to encourage social mobility, reward ambition, and challenge racial disadvantage.

LLR does not even serve the Home Office, which must scrutinise four separate, lengthy, complex and detailed applications for each young person on the LLR path (most of whom will, after a decade of living in limbo, belatedly go on to be recognised as permanently settled in the UK). On any meaningful measure, with each renewal a young person would be recognised as increasingly belonging in the UK. In the experience of the young migrants we work with, however, successive renewals are treated by the

Home Office with the same degree of scrutiny and scepticism as their first application. As Yousif says: 'They just see you as a liar.'

Young migrants and their families do not exist in a vacuum. By definition, if they are granted LLR in the first place, an applicant has demonstrated strong ties to the UK and is likely to be embedded in their community. Official figures suggest there are 332,000 children and young people in the UK without settled status, many of whom will have LLR. A 10-year process that limits their options as they enter adulthood – while creating prolonged uncertainty and depleting funds that could otherwise be invested in their futures – will inevitably have implications for UK society more generally.

Below, we detail some of the areas where the impact of LLR clearly goes beyond individuals, to have a much wider impact – and which we believe warrants further research.

1. Education

State school success stories

The young people featured in this report (and many others that We Belong works with) are testament to the success of the UK's state-funded education system, and the ability of its teachers to instil and support a strong work ethic and high ambitions in students from diverse backgrounds.

But once students leave statutory education, the limitations imposed by LLR prevent them from reaching their full potential. As a result, UK society is being denied a full return on the resources it has invested, while young migrants who have grown up in the UK are prevented from giving back to their communities in the way they aspire to do. ▶

We Belong is frequently contacted by school teachers on behalf of high-achieving students whose path to higher education has been blocked because of LLR. Teachers are often bewildered to learn that pupils they have taught and nurtured for many years are regarded as international students, and not eligible for a student loan.

We Belong co-founder and CEO Chrisann Jarrett is a former head girl at Clapton Girls' Academy, in Hackney, east London (motto: 'arrive with a dream; leave with a future'). Chrisann's teacher initially contacted the youth justice charity Just for Kids Law in desperation, after hearing one of her star students was unable to take up her place to study law at LSE.

Emmanuel, who attended Mossbourne Community Academy, east London, also saw his university plans crumble because of his LLR status. Mossbourne is located in an area with high levels of deprivation, yet is one of the highest achieving schools in the country. Emmanuel had taken its ethos of 'the highest expectations, belief in the value of hard work, unity and no excuses' to heart, achieving As at A-level and winning a place to study chemistry at Imperial College London, which is highly ranked globally for the subject.

In both their cases, Chrisann and Emmanuel's plans for university were delayed, rather than entirely derailed by LLR, but many students in their position are unable to salvage their situation. Following the intervention of Just for Kids Law (which went on to set up the Let us Learn campaign, which later evolved into We Belong), in recognition of Chrisann's potential, LSE offered her a scholarship that covered all her fees and living costs. Thanks to this, she was able to take up her place a year later than planned.

In Emmanuel's case, Imperial refused to recognise him as a home student, even though he had lived in the UK since primary school, which meant he faced international fees of £26,000 a year. After what he calls two 'enforced gap years' (and, again, with support from Just for Kids Law), he was able to take up his place

thanks to a scholarship from a charitable foundation that covered Imperial's fees, and a crowdfunding campaign to cover his living expenses.

Arkam, Andrew, Maheraj, Shahmir, Ijeoma, Mariam, Zeno, Dami, Tosin, Agnes, Tashi, Marvellous, Precious, Lizzie, Lanre, Kimberly, Michelle... We Belong's files are filled with the names of young people who, having benefited from UK state education, have the grades and ambition to study for a degree and aspire to professional careers, only to find their university plans are blown off course, or sometimes permanently sunk, because of LLR. While generally this is due to lack of access to funding, We Belong recently encountered a case where a student was not permitted to enrol because the university would not accept their biometric card, the Home Office's identification document, as proof of their identity.

Teachers and schools that pride themselves on inspiring students from disadvantaged backgrounds are left wondering why some of their students have stalled in their progress to university. Moreover, universities are denied the opportunity to recruit from the widest possible pool, missing out on talented students from often under-represented groups. As a nation, we are failing to maximise the return on our investment in education, by not allowing all young people to reach their full potential.

Higher education

Even when these state school success stories make it to higher education (by delaying their studies until they meet the criteria for a student loan; or by obtaining scholarships and other sources of funding), once they arrive there, they face obstacles their non-migrant peers do not encounter.

Rather than being rewarded and encouraged, those with the highest ambitions and greatest drive find themselves most affected by the limitations imposed by their 'temporary' immigration status. For example, for many students, their chances of increasing employability and broadening experience by working or studying abroad are hampered by ►

LLR. This is either because the period when they would be out of the UK would coincide with when they have to make their LLR renewal; or for fear of jeopardising their chances of qualifying for ‘indefinite leave to remain’, when they have racked up 10 years of LLR. (ILR applicants must show they have not been out of the UK for more than six months in each of the five years before they apply.) Tosin, 22, whose ambition is to start his own events and marketing business, says: ‘Being unable to leave [the UK] for a year out is one of the difficult things.’ He believes he has ‘lost out on opportunities with my uni,’ because of his LLR.

Joy, who arrived in the UK age 5, says: ‘Had this not been hanging over me, I would study abroad but I can’t right now.’

Law student Oliver, 25, is ambitious to spend a year studying at Columbia University in New York, one of America’s top law schools, but ‘physically cannot’. He says: ‘Not because there is no funding to apply for. The funding is there, however, but because of my visa situation.’ He would also like to travel and work abroad like many high-achieving peers, but with LLR this is not an option.

Agnes (who arrived in the UK age 4) went to school in Dagenham, east London, and achieved three As at A-level, before discovering she wasn’t eligible for a student loan (‘a dark time’). Rather than give up on her ambition of being a space scientist, she decided to self-fund her place through part-time work and crowdfunding. She believes her university grades suffered during her first year because of the long hours she had to work, and the uncertainty of whether she could save enough to cover her tuition fees, accommodation, living expenses and Home Office fees. LLR limitations meant she missed out in other ways, too. ‘Going on a year abroad with my university is impossible, because I can’t be out of the country for that long. I couldn’t apply to the National Citizen Service because all my documents were with the Home Office.’

(The 2019 Conservative manifesto states: ‘We will back the National Citizens Service and promote it in schools as a way of bringing communities together.’)

Many of the young people that We Belong supports aspire to work in professions such as law, medicine and science, or, in the case of PON (see below), the police service, where Black people and those from disadvantaged backgrounds are often underrepresented. Attempts by government and professional bodies to address this deficit by attracting more minority candidates are thus being actively hampered by the impact of LLR.

These include Mariam (see case study, page 14), who despite being out of education for five years and facing considerable adversity, won a place at medical school and dreams of being an NHS surgeon. According to government figures from 2020, only 5.2% of NHS medical staff are Black; at the most senior level, it is just 2.9%.¹⁹ Yet, because Home Office policy penalises young people for their immigration status rather than encourages their drive and talent, the only way Mariam can realise her ambition will be to cover her own fees, of up to £40,000 a year, plus living costs.

2. Problems with Student Finance England²⁰

As has been well documented, LLR places barriers in the way of many young migrants with the ambition to attend university. In our experience, these difficulties are compounded by the failings of Student Finance England (SFE) in its dealing with such applicants. SFE staff are not trained to fully understand the LLR eligibility criteria, and the organisation is not set up to cope with the additional bureaucracy that dealing with LLR applicants brings. SFE is failing not just young people who are legally entitled to student finance, but also the universities that have offered them places that they are unable to take up, or where their studies are disrupted. ▶

19 <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/nhs-workforce/latest#by-ethnicity-and-grade-medical-staff>

20 Student Finance England is a non-departmental government body, that works alongside the Student Loans Company to administer loans to students in the UK. Most of the young people We Belong supports live in England, rather than other parts of the UK, and our experience is mainly limited to Student Finance England.

Over the last few years, We Belong has devoted significant resources to working with senior SFE staff to try to mitigate these failings, and ensure young migrants with LLR are given accurate information and receive the same level of service as other students. Despite what we accept are sincere attempts at improvement, substantial problems remain and this public body remains unable to cope with the complexities involved in advising and processing applications from students with LLR.

Our work with SFE was prompted by seeing repeated examples of students being misinformed or misled by SFE, resulting in their educational and career prospects being unfairly blighted. Below, we give examples of the kinds of failings we have seen.

i. Wrong information about eligibility criteria

MTA (who arrived in the UK age 4) won a place to study medicine at Brighton and Sussex Medical School. Her application for student finance was rejected by SFE (correctly, as she did not meet the criteria because of her immigration status). But SFE also incorrectly advised MTA that she would not be eligible until she had indefinite leave to remain. At the time, she had no reason to doubt what she was told, but now believes the adviser was unaware of the rules relating to those who are over 18 and under 25, and have lived in the UK for half their life.

To be eligible for finance, a student must have held their LLR for three years before the first day of the first academic year of their course, and have lived in the UK for half their life. Young people often misunderstand this three-year ordinary residence requirement, believing that if they don't quite meet it when they start their university course, they could fund the first year of their degree themselves and then obtain student finance for the remainder of their studies. This is not the case, but SFE advisers frequently share this misunderstanding. As a result, young people are not being alerted to the fact that if they start their studies before they meet the three-year ordinary residence rule, they will not be eligible for funding for the duration of the course. Rather, they will have to fund their entire studies themselves – and usually be expected to pay international rather than home student fees.

ii. Students wrongly granted finance

The rules relating to student finance and LLR are confusing to lay people, who are reliant on receiving accurate information from SFE. We have seen examples of where SFE has incorrectly awarded funding to someone who does not meet the LLR criteria. In this situation, a student will start their studies in good faith, for the error to emerge later – typically when they apply for funding for their second year. At this point, they are told that further checks have shown that they did not qualify, so not only can they not start the second year of their degree, they are now required to pay back the money from the first year.

iii. Students wrongly refused finance

We also see instances of the opposite situation, where students who meet the home student criteria are refused finance or face inordinate difficulty satisfying SFE of their eligibility, putting their university places at risk. In [case study 3 on page 20](#), we describe JE's experiences of being temporarily removed from his university roll, going into debt, and suffering deteriorating mental health because of SFE's refusal to accept he was a home student.

With the support of Let us Learn, MTA (above) reapplied to SFE once she met the home student criteria. We warned her that she would need extensive documentation in order to satisfy SFE of her eligibility, so she assembled a wealth of evidence, including letters from her schools that her mother had used in previous immigration applications. This material had been accepted by the Home Office, yet SFE rejected it and required more proof. MTA had to go back to her two primary schools, secondary school, sixth form and previous employers to gather additional evidence that she had lived in the UK continuously for the last 10 years. SFE then took months to make a decision, causing MTA intense distress and uncertainty over whether she would be able to start her degree. She was, eventually, granted student finance.

MTA and JE were able to continue or start their studies – but we are aware of instances where eligible students have been forced to drop out of university or were unable to take up their places because of SFE's delays and mistakes in dealing with their applications. ►

iv. Lack of information and feedback

As MTA and JE experienced, LLR students can face significant delays in the processing of their SFE applications. These delays are caused by the additional steps involved in processing an LLR application – including assessing large amounts of documentary evidence of long residency; or contacting the Home Office for confirmation when an applicant is on Section 3c leave (see below).

During this time, there is no easy way for students to obtain progress updates, which greatly adds to the stress of waiting. Additionally, JE was given different, often contradictory, information by different advisers as to whether or not his application had been approved.

In this respect, SFE's service to LLR applicants falls well short of what should be expected from the body that is effectively the gatekeeper to their higher education. As Kimberly Garande, We Belong's outreach officer, comments: 'If Domino's Pizza can give you automatic status updates, why can't student finance?'

v. Misunderstanding Section 3c leave

Another example of SFE's insufficient knowledge of LLR is in relation to Section 3c leave. These failings are compounded by the fact LLR has to be renewed every 30 months – which means young migrants will make at least one LLR renewal during their degree course – and frequent delays by the Home Office in processing these applications.

The Home Office aims to deal with LLR applications within six months, and while some young migrants receive theirs well within that period, delays of a year or more are not uncommon. Where a young migrant's LLR has technically expired and they are waiting for the Home Office to process their renewal, provided they applied in time, they are automatically put on Immigration Act 1971 Section 3c leave. Section 3c leave is intended to protect an applicant in this situation from having a 'break' in their continuous lawful immigration status.

vi. The hostile environment lives on at SFE

The Home Office may have stopped using the term 'hostile environment' following the Windrush scandal, but a hostile approach

continues to hold sway in some SFE dealings with migrant applicants.

In our experience, SFE – a body set up to provide loans and grants so that eligible young people can attend university – often takes a more sceptical and exacting approach towards applicants than the government department in charge of immigration.

One example of SFE's 'hostility' is the case of a 24-year-old applicant who had arrived in the UK age 8, and had held LLR for more than three years, making him eligible for student finance. Despite this, SFE refused to look at his application, as he could not supply evidence of where he was living between December 2008 and February 2009. His explanation that his family had been moved repeatedly by the Home Office during this period – so he had been unable to attend school for three months – was rejected. Not only was he forced to leave university but he also ended up in debt as a result.

In MTA's case (above), SFE demanded a higher level of evidence of how long she had lived in the UK than had been required by the Home Office in order to grant her immigration status. JE had a similarly frustrating experience while trying to demonstrate that he met the eligibility criteria and was entitled to funding.

And while it requires minute levels of proof from LLR students, SFE issues no official or consistent guidance on the documentation it requires. Consequently, applicants such as JE are told different things by different advisers and left struggling to know what exactly they must submit to prove their eligibility.

As reported above, SFE treatment of students on Section 3c leave is out of step with the Home Office's approach. In a similar case, We Belong was approached by a 17-year-old who had been rejected by SFE because of a 16-day break between his first and second LLR applications, due to a mistake by his lawyer. The Home Office recognised this and granted his renewed status on a continuous basis; yet SFE deemed it to be an 'unlawful' break and refused his loan application. ▶

SFE's rigid approach is exemplified by the 2019 case of OA, a victim of domestic violence, whose immigration status had lapsed. The Home Office accepted that the break in OA's status was due to her ex-partner keeping control of her documents as part of the abuse, and granted her indefinite leave to remain. SFE, by contrast, said the break meant she failed to satisfy the three years' legal residence criteria and refused her a loan. OA sought legal advice from the Public Interest Law Centre (PILC), but SFE maintained its position throughout its three-stage appeals process and a pre-action letter. It was only after PILC successfully took the case to the high court that OA received her loan, by which time she had had to leave her studies and her mental health had suffered.

SFE is a large public body whose express purpose is to identify eligible applicants and provide them with funding for their studies. Yet young migrants are missing out on their right to funding because SFE staff are not adequately trained to understand the complexities of LLR or the implications of Section 3c leave. As a result, young people and the universities that want to recruit them are being poorly served.

Given that SFE struggles with the complexities of LLR, it should come as no surprise that other third parties, including employers, landlords, banks and other service providers, are also overburdened and confused by it. Below are some examples of the impact on employers and employment for those on LLR.

3. Employment

i. Reinforcing disadvantage

LLR reinforces the existing and well-documented racial disadvantage and disparities that Black people face in the world of work. Official government figures show Black people receive lower average pay; are more likely to work in elementary occupations or the care sector; and experience higher unemployment rates.²¹ They are nearly three times as likely as

white people to be out of work²²; with young Black people (exactly the cohort that We Belong supports) finding it particularly hard to gain employment. One in four Black 16-to-24 year olds were unemployed between June 2019 and July 2020, compared to one in 10 white people of the same age²³.

With severe penalties for employing 'illegal' migrants, employers are understandably wary of taking on anyone with an unfamiliar form of immigration status.

Sarah Jane, 24, in the UK since age 6, says: 'I'm questioned about it at every job interview. It's humiliating.' She believes she has missed out on work opportunities 'as companies fear immigration policies or have little to knowledge of [them]'.

Oliver felt unable to try to switch jobs or speak up about feeling exploited by his employer, who was aware of his LLR status. 'I didn't want to be there, I always wanted more for myself. There was this idea of people knowing the situation that you are in and taking advantage of it, and people thinking that you are stupid because you are in that situation.'

ii. The burden of Section 3c leave

Home Office delays in processing applications and widespread lack of understanding of Section 3c leave (shared by Student Finance England, above) only adds to young migrants feeling stigmatised or disadvantaged when it comes to employment.

In one case, after being offered a new teaching assistant job, a young migrant explained that all his paperwork was with the Home Office while it processed his LLR renewal. Rather than contact the Home Office to confirm his status, the school withdrew the job offer. Luckily, in this case, the young man was still working out his notice at his previous school, which agreed to keep him on. ▶

21 Li, Y. and Heath, A. (2020). 'Persisting disadvantages: a study of labour market dynamics of ethnic unemployment and earnings in the UK (2009-2015)', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46 (5), pp. 857-878.

22 Office for National Statistics (2019a). *Occupation at UK level by sector, industry, age and ethnicity*. Available at <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabour-market/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/adhocs/10663occupationatuklevelbysectorindustryageandethnicity>.

23 Francis-Devine, B. (2020). *Unemployment by ethnic background*. House of Commons Library Briefing Paper no. 6385. London: House of Commons Library.

Seyi started a new job a month into a 10-month wait for his LLR renewal to be approved by the Home Office. He explained his immigration situation to his new employers, who, unlike the previous example, were understanding, ‘but from that moment, I could feel a sense that I was a burden. I was really scared I might get fired for something that I have no control over’, he says. When his renewal came through, ‘I sent it straight over and they were like, “are you sure this is everything?” You don’t feel that sense of safety. You feel a shift in the relationship between your workplace and yourself.’

April was being chased by her HR department so, after waiting six months, tried contacting the Home Office for an update. ‘I called them, and they were just awful. They don’t give you any information. They just basically send you around in circles.’

Having heard from other young migrants that they had lost their jobs in this situation, April spoke to her manager, who ‘was kind enough to see my position and vouched for me’ to the HR department. ‘Even though they still supported me, I still felt that panic and that anxiousness that I’m going to lose my job and lose my income.’ It was 14 months before April’s renewal came through and she could provide her employer with the information they needed.

Additionally, given the frequency of LLR renewals, any relief accorded to the employer or employee is short lived. When Seyi’s next renewal was a few months away, his work has started questioning him about his status again. ‘You can feel they are on edge as well. I’m scared that, when this Covid-19 is over, are they even going to want to go through that process of dealing with the government again?’

To avoid straining of work relationships, some young migrants avoid applying for jobs when they are on Section 3c leave, even if this means delaying their career progression.

When Anu graduated, she felt she couldn’t start applying for jobs that would help build her career during the six months while she waited for her LLR renewal to come through. ‘In that time, I couldn’t apply for any other jobs because I knew that they would ask for evidence for my right to work here, and I wouldn’t be able to provide that and would have to explain the whole process – just basically saying it’s with the Home Office. So in order to avoid all of that, I just continued temping.’

The stigma attached to LLR and Section 3c leave saps young migrants of confidence and makes them reluctant to go for promotion, or to do anything to draw attention to themselves. Seyi says he felt ‘ashamed to even look at anyone’ in the HR department, after speaking to them repeatedly about his LLR renewal delays. Even though he knew they would be bound by confidentiality, he still feared word of his immigration status issues would get out. ‘You feel like you’re going to be the clown, the joke.’ Carol says: ‘When the managers were talking to me about progression, I was just like, no, I’m not doing that.’

As well as putting additional burdens on employers and hindering staff progression, LLR also serves to narrow the pool of potential recruits, including in some areas of public service with long-standing problems with attracting and retaining Black recruits.

PON arrived in the UK age 8 from Nigeria. Her mother works for the NHS, and all PON’s siblings were born in the UK. The family had periods of intense poverty when she was growing up, relying on foodbanks. Despite this, PON was ambitious for her future and wanted to join the police force. She did not qualify for a student loan, so had to abandon plans for a criminology degree, and instead applied to the police force as a direct recruit. She was told her LLR status made her ineligible to apply until she has qualified for indefinite leave to remain. The earliest PON would be eligible for ILR is 2028, when she will have lived in the UK for 21 years, and be 29 - an age which makes it unlikely she will be able to pursue her preferred career path. ►

4. Families

'A strong country needs strong families.'
Conservative Party manifesto, 2019

'One of the biggest divides in our society is between those who can and cannot afford their own home.' Conservative Party manifesto, 2019

'Owning a home is...about investing in your family, saving for the future, and putting down roots in a community.' Then Housing Secretary Robert Jenrick, September 2019

i. Housing

LLR puts families going through the process under intense financial strain for at least 10 years (at current fee levels, an LLR renewal equates to over £86 a month for every family member with LLR). This damages family stability and increases housing insecurity. Black households are at greater risk of losing their homes: although Black people only make up around 3 per cent of the population, 14 per cent of homeless households are Black.²⁴

LLR families face a lack of access to state support – including housing and in-work benefits – plus additional potential expenses such as university fees. This reduces further the amount of family income available for housing. Thus, the effect of LLR is to compound the existing housing disadvantage experienced by Black families. Only 30 per cent of Black households own their own home, compared to 70 per cent of white households.²⁵

Saving for a deposit or affording a mortgage are immeasurably harder for anyone on LLR. As Dami discovered ([page 7](#)), those that do manage to save up to buy their own home, despite the punitive cost of LLR, will face a more limited choice of mortgage provider and potentially higher interest rate, because of their 'temporary' immigration status (even if, like Dami, they are married to and living with, a British citizen). And on [page 18](#), we describe how Kelly's mother sold the family home to pay her daughter's university fees, and has lived in rented accommodation ever since.

Many of the young people featured in this report say they or their families would have bought their own homes if they had not been burdened with the cost of LLR. Here are just a few comments:

Marvellous: *'We could save up for other things like a house but right now all our money is tied into keeping ourselves legal.'*

Lizzie: *'By now, I would have been saving for a mortgage because that was my plan.'*

Ijeoma: *'We've not been able to save for anything meaningful, for example, our own home.'*

Tosin: *'[The money would have been] invested in my future, buying a car, a house, starting a business.'*

ii. Family insecurity

Family units are inevitably put under stress by the uncertainty and drain on family finances that living with LLR for a decade brings. This limits opportunities and leads to difficult choices. A contributing factor is the Home Office's practice of treating young people's applications as separate from that of their parents and younger siblings when they reach 18, even if they are all living as a family unit.

For reasons Jemma doesn't understand, her family's lawyer delayed submitting their application for months, by which time she had turned 18. 'They sat me down with my mum, and said, we know you made this application before your daughter turned 18, but we can't have her on it any more. We have to remove her, and just deal with you and your son. So we had to make separate applications.'

Zara describes how when she and her parents needed to appeal the refusal of their LLR, her family couldn't afford a lawyer for both ▶

24 Ethnicity Facts and Figures (2018). *Statutory homelessness*. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/housing/homelessness/statutory-homelessness/latest>.

25 Ethnicity Facts and Figures (2020). *Home ownership*. <https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/housing/owning-and-renting/home-ownership/latest#by-ethnicity>.

applications. ‘As there were two of them, it made common sense for them to get the solicitor. I was like, so why did you even put in the appeal for me if I’m not going to get anyone to go with me to court that day? I just felt, what was the point of anything?’

iii. Different statuses

²⁶Michelle’s mother’s earnings as a carer would only stretch to cover one LLR renewal fee, so she had to choose between Michelle and her younger sister. As Michelle was about to go to university, she was chosen, while her sister fell out of status.

It is not just the high cost of LLR that leads to multiple statuses within families. Mariam (see page 14) lived in Nigeria with her grandmother until she was 15. After her grandmother died, Mariam had no family left in Nigeria, so came to the UK to join her mother and brother, who are both British citizens. Despite her young age and family circumstances, the Home Office refused Mariam’s LLR application, and it took her five years before it was finally granted. As a result, Mariam will be in her mid-30s at least before she will have the same citizenship as the rest of her family.

iv. Disengagement from civil society

A small scale-survey of We Belong members conducted shortly before the Windrush Scandal broke suggests that the insecurity that LLR creates deters young migrants from accessing essential services, and makes them reluctant to have dealings with official bodies.²⁷

Some 65 per cent said fear of the hostile environment has deterred them from accessing services such as housing or banking, or that they have lost trust in these services because of it. Fifteen per cent said they feared accessing primary health care, or were unsure whether they could (even though primary health care is not dependent on immigration status); 19 per cent said they felt uncertain about what services they were allowed to access or feared how they would be received.

This reluctance and disengagement is damaging to individuals and potentially allows failings in public bodies and other essential services to go unreported and unchecked. It is a relatively common experience for LLR applicants to experience poor legal advice, and we have even witnessed instances of dishonest lawyers absconding with applicants’ money.

In Michelle’s case, above, poor legal advice given in an earlier application led to her family’s later predicament. While her mother’s application was granted, her and her sister’s were rejected. Having already paid the fees for both of her daughters once, her mother could only scrape together enough to make one additional application.

Oliver has also had experience of ‘very bad’ lawyers. ‘You’ve given them money, not got it back. I would be very self judgemental, as if I should’ve noticed. I always felt guilty because I wasn’t able to fix the situation itself.’

Whether blaming themselves for their lawyer’s mistakes, or through a combination of fear of interactions with officialdom and the relentless pressure of LLR, young migrants have not complained about their treatment. Instead they have had to focus on raising money and assembling evidence in order to make an application, for fear of falling out of status. ■

²⁶ The Michelle referred to in this section is a different Michelle to the one referred to elsewhere in this report.

²⁷ ‘Remember when Windrush was still just the name of a ship?’, Fiona Bawdon, *Citizenship in times of turmoil?* Elgar, 2019.

CASE STUDY 5

Study plans blocked at every turn

Zara, 19; arrived in the UK from Nigeria, age 12. She is working as an apprentice, having had to give up her place at university.

“I knew my parents couldn’t afford international fees. I had to come back home from uni. I think I just sank back into that dark pit.”

Zara was proud of her A-level results and, with an offer from Warwick University, was excited about going to university at the same time as her friends. She had submitted her LLR application just before her exams in 2018, hoping to be all set before the first term started.

She says: ‘I was looking forward to going to uni. I didn’t really understand at that time what LLR was and how it affects the fees you had to pay for uni. All I knew was, I was sending off my papers to the Home Office; I’ll get it back. I thought it would be so easy. I was thinking, I’m going to uni with all my friends. It’s all going to be rosy. It’s going to be fine.’

She spent the summer holidays waiting, and hoping to hear back from the Home Office. ‘It was like: am I going? Am I not going?’ When September arrived and her friends started heading off to university, Zara realised she would need to make other plans. ‘I was thinking, I’m probably going to stay at home this year and hopefully go next year. I was looking at my options, what other things I could do if I wasn’t going to uni that year.’ October came around; still she hadn’t heard anything.

The continued waiting and uncertainty took its toll. ‘Everyone had gone off. I didn’t know what to do. I was staying at home for weeks on end. I couldn’t get a job. I couldn’t do anything. That’s

when your emotional and mental state starts to decline, I guess. I’m thinking, what am I going to do with my life now? I’ve got my grades. I was so proud of what I got then, as well. It’s [a case of] so what do I do?’

After discussing with friends at her church, Zara decided to go back to sixth form for a year. ‘They said ... when next year comes, you hear back from [Home Office] and you can go to uni.’ No one around her understood at that point that, even if Zara’s LLR was granted, she still wouldn’t have the same options as her peers.

In early 2019, the Home Office responded. Her application had been refused. Zara says: ‘I think that was my lowest point.’ After suffering anxiety attacks, she was prescribed antidepressants and started having counselling. ‘I was feeling panicky about everything. Emotionally, I was a wreck. I just felt like I couldn’t do anything.’

Her appeal against the Home Office decision was set for September and in October she heard it had been successful: finally, she had her LLR. By then, she knew she would not qualify for a student loan, but thought she had found a way to get her university plans back on track. She says: ‘I chose to go to Lancaster. I had a scholarship of about £4,000 based on income, grades and stuff. So I thought if I could access that scholarship, my parents only really had to pay the rest of the £5,000 and I could go. I thought I could do anything now.’

Excited, Zara moved to Lancaster to start her course – but within a fortnight she was back home. The university informed her that ▶

because she hadn't had LLR for the minimum period of three years, it categorised her as an international, rather than a home, student. This meant she would have to pay considerably higher fees.

In confusion, Zara contacted We Belong and spoke to then co-CEO Dami Makinde. 'Dami advised me to come back home rather than have whatever amount of debt they were going to put on me. I knew my parents couldn't afford that. I had to come back home from there. I think I just sank back into that dark pit that I was in a couple of months ago.'

Zara took a waitressing job, which paid well, even if it didn't suit her career ambitions. 'I was making decent money, but I wasn't happy. It wasn't a job that I wanted to do.' Friends and colleagues, who were aware of her immigration situation and could see her potential, encouraged Zara to apply for an apprenticeship, which she did successfully. Even though now she is earning less money than in her previous job, she says: 'I think the experience that I'm gaining from this could take me places that the other job couldn't do.' ■



We Belong's recommendations for ending deintegration

Below, we set out our six-point plan for urgent reform of limited leave to remain (LLR), to ensure that we are the last Deintegration Generation.

1

A five-year path to settlement (permanent status) for those who have lived in the UK for half their lives or more.

The current 10-year LLR route robs us of our sense of belonging in and to the country we call home. It is overlong, punitive, and limits the life chances of young people who have grown up in the UK. The financial and educational constraints it imposes mean many young migrants reaching early adulthood are denied the opportunity to realise their ambitions. The current path - consisting of 10 years of multiple applications and spiralling fees - only increases the likelihood that young people will fall out of status and have their lives ruined as a result. A five-year LLR path to settlement would be fairer, provide greater certainty, and allow us to fully contribute to our communities and wider society.

2

An end to the profit element of LLR for children and young people under 25.

It is deeply damaging to us, and society more generally, for so many young migrants who have grown up in the UK to enter adulthood weighed down by such a heavy and ever increasing financial burden. Limiting the LLR fee to the actual cost of processing each application would automatically lead to the tapering-off of fees for LLR renewal applications. ▶

3

Limited leave to remain fee increases to match inflation.

The total cost of LLR (including Home Office fees and the Immigration Health Surcharge) has leapt by 331% since 2014, a rate of increase that has caught out many young people and left them struggling to afford their next application. Limiting annual LLR fee increases to inflation would be fair and, importantly, give young migrants more certainty over how much they need to save for each subsequent application.

4

A fairer, more comprehensive fee waiver system.

We welcome the rise in recent months in the number of fee waivers granted to LLR applicants, and urge the Home Office to ensure it continues. We repeat our call that fee waivers should be extended to all child LLR, ILR, and citizenship applicants. In addition, we call for the removal of disincentives that deter many who might be eligible for a fee waiver from even applying, for fear of losing their immigration status altogether.

5

A review of the Immigration Health Surcharge.

We believe there should be an urgent review to consider an exemption from the Immigration Health Surcharge for migrants who have lived in the UK half their lives; and/or making the health levy payable only when LLR is first granted, dropping it for subsequent applications. We are calling for an end to this 'double tax' paid by young migrants and their families, who are already paying towards the NHS through their taxation.

6

A commitment from the Home Office to listen and learn

We echo the calls in the Windrush Lessons Learned Review (recommendation 8) for the Home Office to 'take steps to understand the groups and communities' that are on the receiving end of its policies and procedures; and to involve migrants in the design of its services. Government ministers should 'make clear they expect officials to seek out a diverse range of voices and prioritise community-focused policy', the Windrush review added. At We Belong, we stand ready to continue to work with the Home Office to achieve these important aims. ■

