

We Belong

Mental Health Check

Interviews by Kimberly Garande
Analysis and commentary by Fiona Bawdon
November 2020

“You are walking on a tightrope, just hoping not to fall. There isn’t a single day when the thought of the outcome of your Home Office application doesn’t cross your mind”

Oliver, 25

A clarion call for change

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Chrisann Jarrett and Dami Makinde,
co-CEOs, We Belong

While politicians talk blithely about integration, our government continues to preside over an immigration system that stigmatises, isolates and impoverishes young migrants who have grown up in the UK. The length and precariousness of the Home Office application process robs those of us going through it of any sense of belonging, shattering previously held certainties about our identity and ‘Britishness’.

We Belong’s Mental Health Check is not an easy read – but it is an essential one. It is a clarion call for change. Our report catalogues the terrible toll that the immigration system in general – and the 10-year Limited Leave to Remain route in particular – is taking on young people’s mental and physical health.

Our country cannot afford to go on like this: too many young lives are being damaged and distorted; too much harm is being inflicted; too much ambition and talent is being hobbled – or even extinguished.

Here, we repeat the call of our 2019 report, ‘Normality is a Luxury: How Limited Leave to Remain is blighting young lives’, for a shorter, more affordable and humane path to citizenship for those of us who are proud to call the UK our home (see page 30-31).

About We Belong

We Belong is the first UK-wide campaign organisation to be set up and led entirely by young migrants. We work with and for young people who migrated to the UK as children: campaigning for their rights, and developing them into future leaders, by providing information, support and training. We work closely with young migrants to advocate for equal access to higher education and for a fairer, more humane immigration system. www.webelong.org.uk

Thank you

Many people contributed to making this report. Our biggest thanks must go to the 15 young migrants who spoke so honestly about difficult and personal issues. We have used pseudonyms for obvious reasons, but you know who you are, and you have our heartfelt respect and gratitude: Seyi, Carol, Michael, Anu, Zara, Oliver, David, Anwar, Gabriel King, Jemma, April, Michelle, Matthew, Rachel, Yousif. Thanks also to Shahmir Akhtar.

Thank you to Kimberly Garande, We Belong's outreach officer, who conducted the interviews with such professionalism and care, even though these are issues that affect her personally (see page 7 for Kimberly's account).

Thank you to Fiona Bawdon, We Belong's comms consultant and journalist, for supporting and guiding us throughout, for seeing the wood for the trees, and for analysing the findings and writing up the report.

Thank you to illustrator Patrick Kennedy of Upfunt, for such generosity and creativity: your animal drawings say more about young migrants' experience of the Home Office than words ever could (see page 10-16).

Thank you also to designer Dan Farley for bringing our report to life so beautifully; and to proofreader/subeditor Gaynor Jamieson for pulling out all the stops to make sure we met our deadlines.

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About this research

15 Participants

13.6 YEARS
Average length of
time living in the UK

7 YEARS
Shortest period

23 YEARS
Longest period

12
Have been living in
the UK at least half
their life

23 YEARS
Average age of
participants

18 YEARS
Youngest

27 YEARS
Oldest

8 are studying
4 are working full time

2 are furloughed
1 is an apprentice

5 different countries of origin:
Nigeria; Ghana; Guyana; Iraq; and Kazakhstan.



We Belong's Mental Health Check is based on 15 semi-structured interviews with young migrants aged 18-27, who have all had previous contact with We Belong. Of these, 14 are going through the Home Office's 10-year, Limited Leave to Remain application process; one has been granted Indefinite Leave to Remain.

We Belong outreach officer Kimberly Garande conducted all the interviews remotely by videolink in April and May 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Interviews lasted around an hour and were recorded. The transcribed responses were then subject to thematic analysis by We Belong's comms consultant, journalist and researcher Fiona Bawdon.

All interviewees are anonymous, due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter. Each interviewee chose their own pseudonym.

'It resurrected my own fears'

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Kimberly Garande,
Outreach officer, We Belong

Kimberly Garande, We Belong's outreach officer, describes how interviewing 15 young migrants about their mental health had a profound effect on her.

Like the 15 participants in We Belong's Mental Health Check, I am also going through the Home Office's 10-year Limited Leave to Remain (LLR) process, so I thought I knew what to expect from the interviews. I was wrong.

Having had similar experiences to them meant it was easy for me to relate to what was being said and build a rapport with these young people – but nothing could prepare me for the intensity of their answers, or the impact they would have on me.

For some participants, it was the first time that they had shown so much vulnerability, or spoken in depth about the trauma of being on the 10-year route to settlement. I was honoured that they felt comfortable to share confidential information with me, and felt safe enough to unlock their feelings and worries about their mental health without being judged. It is the depth and honesty of their answers that make this report so important and powerful.

I started out conducting two or three interviews a day, one after the other (all were done via Zoom video conference calls). However, I quickly found that this was not sustainable as it left me feeling emotionally exhausted. I changed to doing one interview a day and took long breaks in between, during which I did my other work.

It was eye-opening how all the young people felt strongly defined by the Home Office process. They spoke about their aspirations to contribute to and engage in society, but when asked about the impact on their feelings of identity and belonging to the UK, their answers revealed the huge emotional toll of continuously feeling insecure and unsafe.

As a staff member of We Belong, I was careful to conduct these interviews objectively, but I cried after many of them.

The long, winding route to citizenship is heavily burdensome, and leaves young people feeling like outcasts in the society we call home. The participants were forced into adult spaces and given adult burdens, with no knowledge or resources to help them at the time when they should have been concerned about childhood issues. Hearing how they were living in fear, and the mental effects of seeing their peers move on to different life stages while they remained stagnant, resurrected my own trauma from being on the 10-year route to settlement. ►

◀ I, too, came to the UK as a child, but since I was so young my parents sheltered me from the LLR application process. They carried the monetary stress and lack of legal support. I realise now that their actions enabled me to grow up feeling like a 'normal' teenager; it was only when I reached 18 that I discovered my immigration status could mean the end of my dream of going to university.

Hearing these stories made me reflect on what my parents went through, and it felt as if I was processing some of their trauma. Another effect was that worries about my next application began creeping to the forefront of my mind.

A number of the interviewees said that talking about their personal journeys provided a sense of therapy; I felt the same. Processing both their experiences and my own allowed me to revisit my own trauma and connect more with these young people, which is just one reason why their responses were so powerful.

I only hope that by listening to the voices of these young migrants, the Home Office will be as affected as I was by interviewing them. ■

The Limited Leave to Remain tightrope

Limited Leave to Remain (LLR) is a form of immigration status granted by the Home Office to people on the basis that they have strong family ties to the UK. It must be renewed at 30-month intervals over a 10-year period or it will lapse – leaving an individual at risk of removal from the UK by immigration enforcement. The young migrants interviewed for We Belong's Mental Health Check compare the 10-year LLR process to being on a rollercoaster or a tightrope – one misstep and they could fall. David says: "I feel my life [in the UK] could be washed away in the blink of an eye."

It is only after four subsequent and precisely timed LLR applications that people can apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) in the UK, also known as 'settlement' – at which point they are recognised as permanently living in this country. After having ILR for a year, they can apply for citizenship and finally officially become 'British'.

Each stage of this lengthy path to Britishness – the four LLR applications; an ILR application; and a citizenship application – is expensive, bureaucratic and fraught with uncertainty.

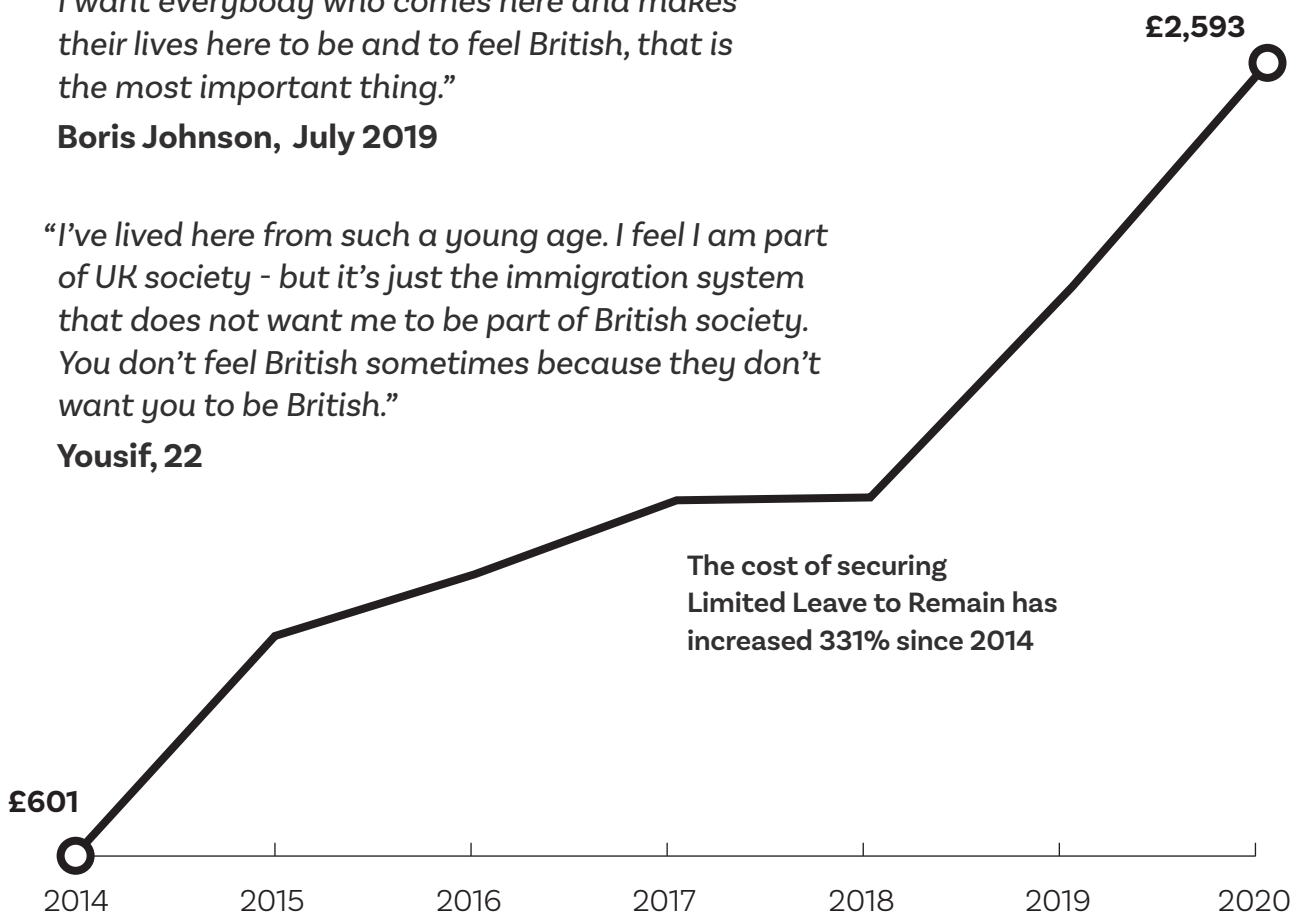
On top of this, the cost of each LLR application has skyrocketed in recent years.

"I want everybody who comes here and makes their lives here to be and to feel British, that is the most important thing."

Boris Johnson, July 2019

"I've lived here from such a young age. I feel I am part of UK society - but it's just the immigration system that does not want me to be part of British society. You don't feel British sometimes because they don't want you to be British."

Yousif, 22



We asked our interviewees: **If the Home Office were an animal, what animal would it be and why?**

Their answers were revealing.

HYENA

“I was thinking of the Lion King. Hyenas are very predatory creatures who hunt in packs. You can’t trust them, with their laugh: you know they want to eat you. It’s the same predatory behaviour that the Home Office has. I have no respect for hyenas at all. Then again, I have no respect for the Home Office.”

Gabriel King | Aged 20 | Politics student | Arrived in the UK aged 11.

LION

“They would be a lion, because they are so aggressive. They go after their prey and they don’t care about anyone else. The lion matches the level of aggression that they have.”

Michelle | Aged 26 | Final-year psychology student | Arrived in the UK aged 11.

MEERKATS

“The Home Office would be a meerkat because meerkats are always poking out of holes and wanting to know all your business. They are perceived as cute animals, which parallels the Home Office being seen by some people as acting in the interests of the country, trying to promote British values. But, in fact, meerkats are savage, and deceptively aggressive.”

Anwar | Aged 25 | Student teacher | Arrived in the UK aged 9.

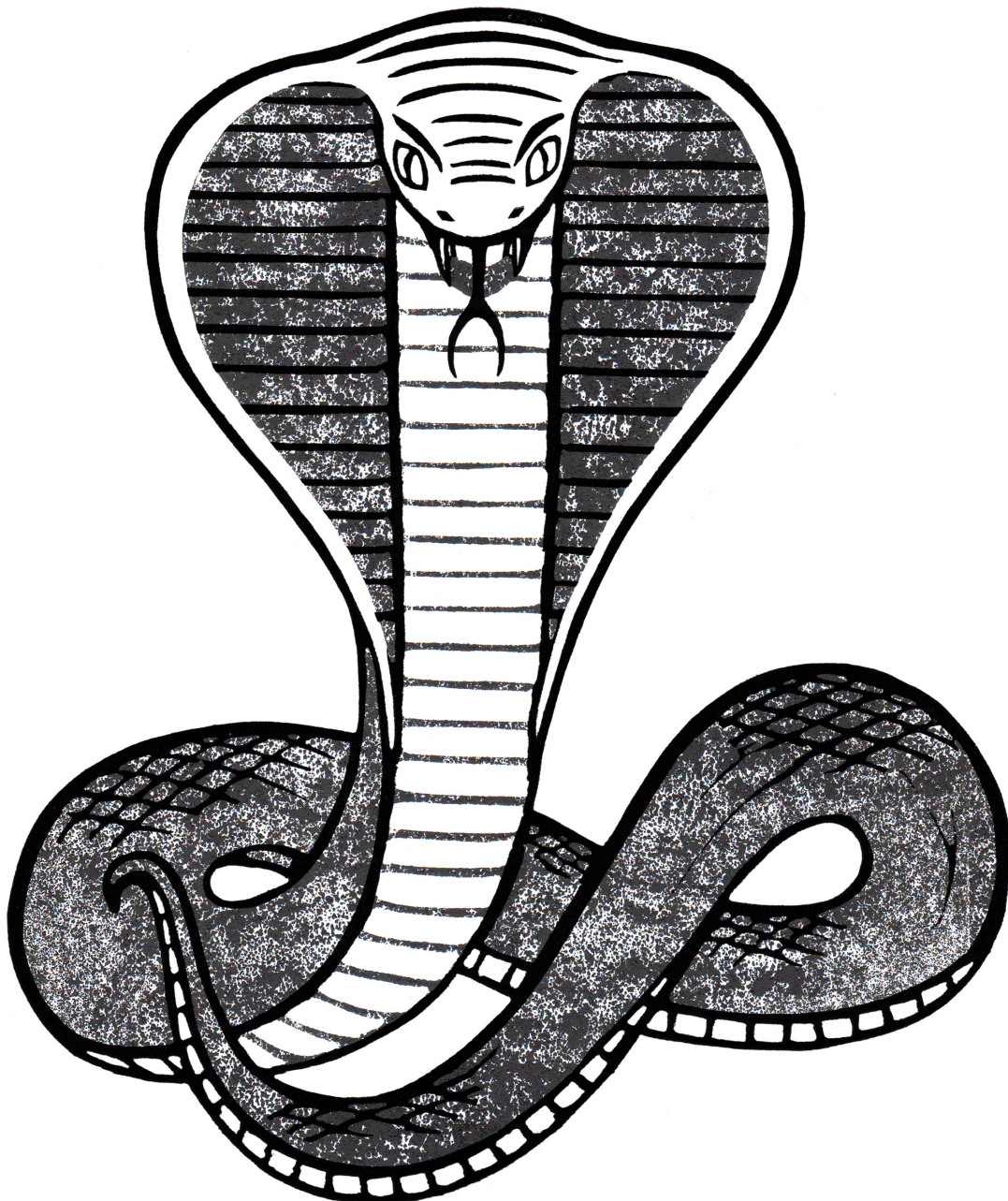
SNAKE

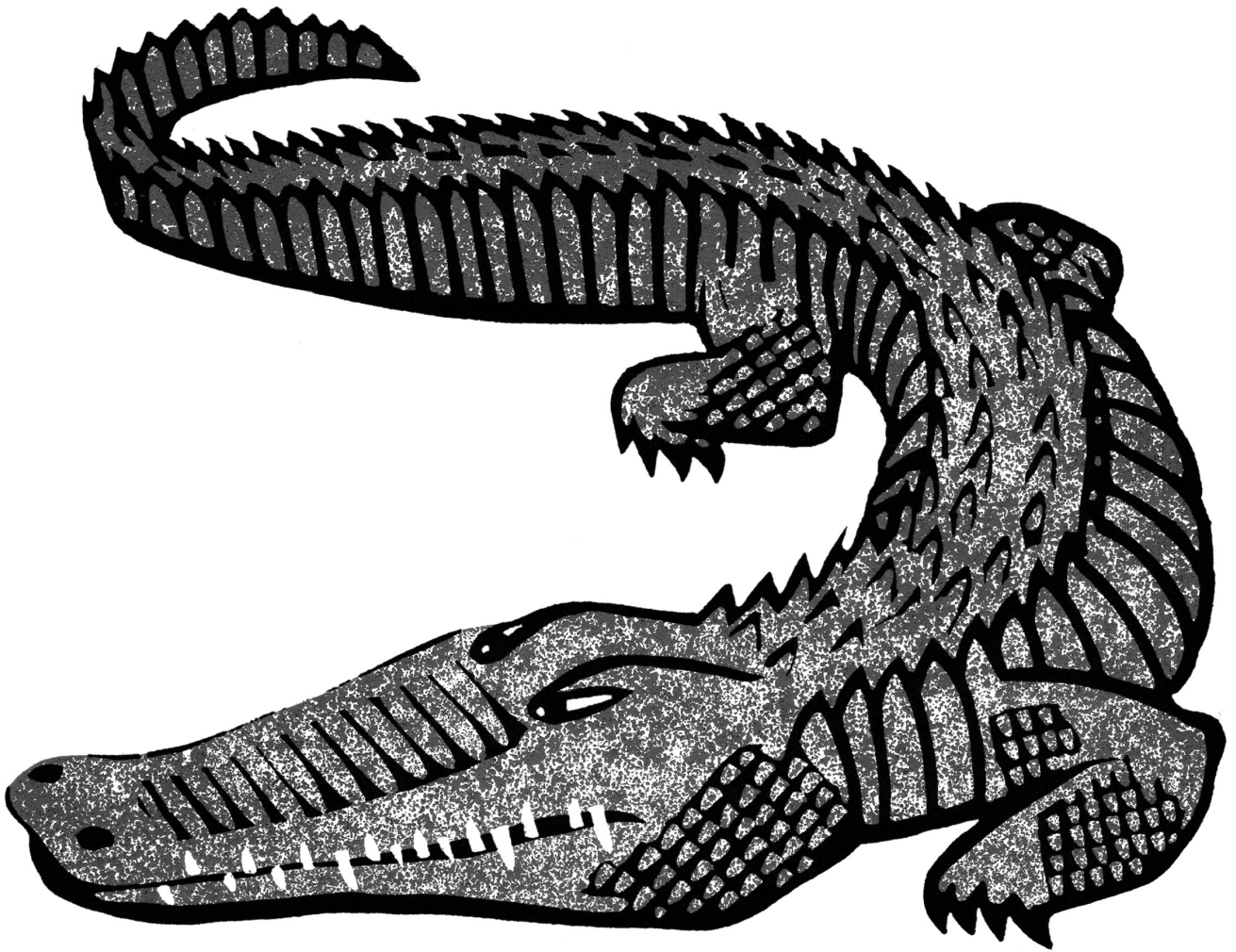
“A snake, because the Home Office are legit the most untrustworthy people I have ever dealt with. They are clever and they say something but they don’t stick to that. They will try to wriggle their way out and use all this jargon and stuff just to make people’s lives hell. And they’re very venomous.”

Seyi | Aged 24 | Business student | Arrived UK aged 9

“A snake; a python – just because you can’t trust a snake. I’m not an animal expert but from what I’ve seen from documentaries, snakes can be unpredictable.”

Carol | 25 | Working at time of interview; hoping to take up university place September 2020 | Arrived UK aged 11.





ALLIGATOR

“They lie in wait and when their prey just steps into the water, they jump up and eat them. That’s how I feel the Home Office are: they’re waiting for all the people that are coming from other countries and want to settle here and make a better life for themselves. They’re like, how can we extort you? What can we do to make your life difficult? I feel that’s how they are; the way that they increase the fees. It’s like when you’re trying to escape from the alligator and it just keeps on dragging you back with its powerful jaws.”

Jemma | Aged 25 | Student | Arrived in the UK aged 2.

MONKEY

“Monkeys are active and they control everything, in the way they do things. Monkeys are cheeky and active, and so are the Home Office.”

Rachel | Aged 18 | Psychology BTEC student | Arrived in the UK aged 11.

LEECHING CHAMELEON

“When you speak to people who haven’t been through the immigration system, [they never have] a negative opinion of the Home Office. It’s just like, ‘oh wow, the Home Office is great. I must get my passport’. But when you speak to people who’ve been through the immigration system, they actually know what it’s like to have your life turned upside down: the frustrations; the negative energies. The Home Office is one thing to one person, and another thing to others. And in terms of leeching, they just suck our money away every two-and-a-half years. They are leeching off migrants. So that’s a leeching chameleon.”

Michael | Aged 22 | Furloughed from bar job | Arrived UK aged 11

STRAY CAT

“If there was a stray cat on the street where you lived, for example, it might be friendly when it wants food or something. I’ve watched quite a lot of animal videos and I’ve seen stray cats coming to people’s homes just to get what they want, and then going back out, completely disregarding the family. That’s what the Home Office is like. They take your resources, and then just leave you to fend for yourself. But there’s always that element of coming back; you can never fully separate from them – as in, it’s going to take me 20 years before I fully separate from them. That is a long time, with a lot of money invested in that. So I would say the Home Office is a stray cat.”

**David | Aged 21
Science student
Arrived in the UK aged 9.**



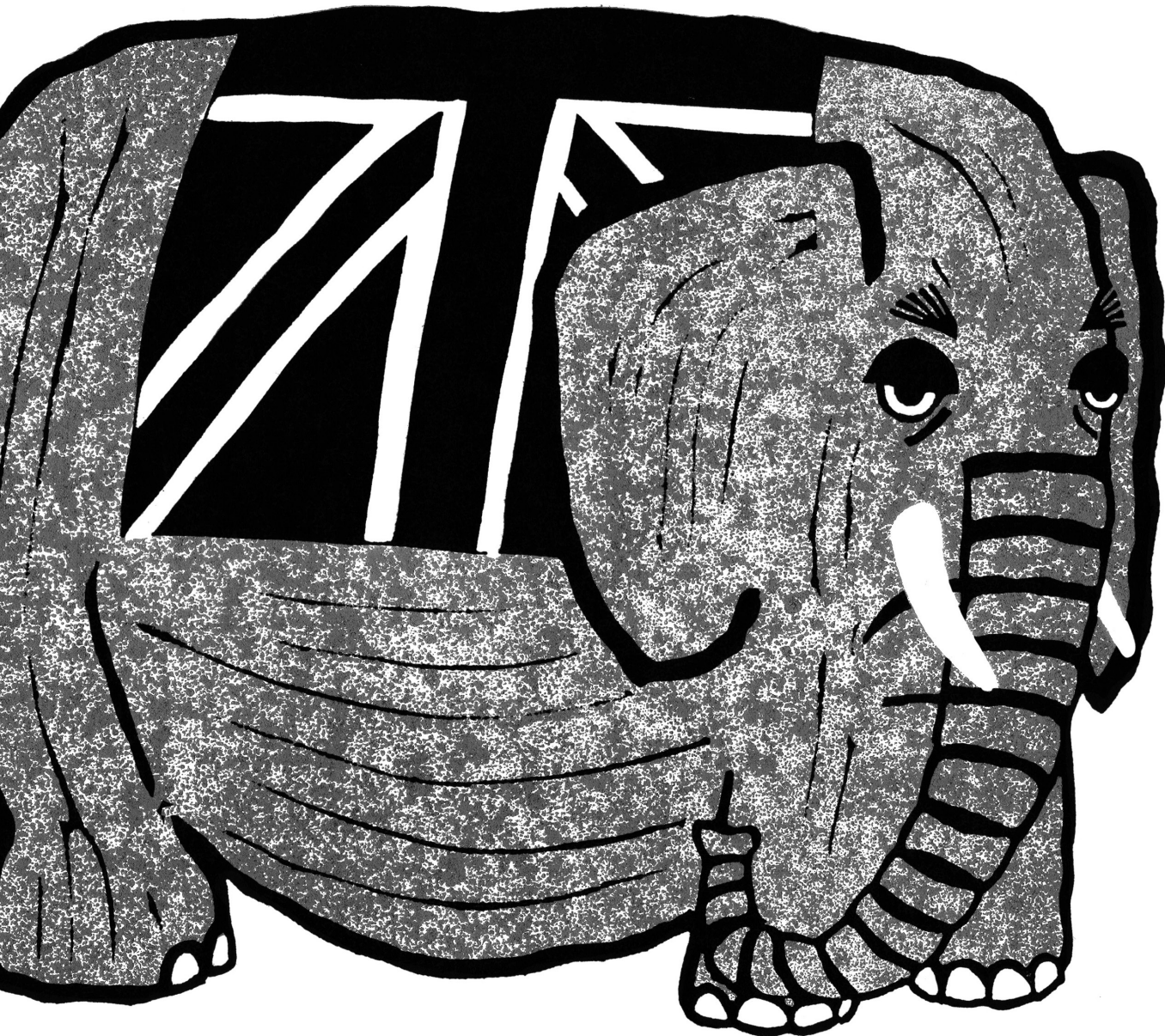
ELEPHANT

“An elephant in the room, just taking up space – but people are too scared to discuss it. A huge, fat elephant. You can hear and see it, but it’s just so hard to discuss, which contributes to the mind trickery.”

Anu | Aged 24 | Temping before the Covid-19 pandemic
Born in the UK, but then taken abroad | Returned to UK age 11.

“What animal is really big but scared of the littlest thing? An elephant. The metaphor really is that they have the capability to do it, but I think the leadership in government is just not bold enough to give that daring voice to the migrant community and say ‘hey, we’re going to welcome you with open arms’, because it’s [about] politics.”

Matthew | Aged 27 | Working full time | Arrived in the UK aged 8.



VULTURE

“Vultures are wretched animals, aren’t they? They’re just always watching with evil eyes, just circling around you, waiting for your downfall. They never let go. The littlest thing they can hold against you and say, ‘oh sorry. We can’t renew your status’. They’re just waiting for that little thing to swoop. For me, that’s what the Home Office is.”

Zara | Aged 19 | Apprentice
Arrived in the UK aged 12.



COCKROACH

“A cockroach because they are so annoying. They always appear out of nowhere. Everywhere you go, there are cockroaches. The rules of the Home Office and the immigration rules are everywhere you go. To make an application, to do something, to do work, there is always that one question: ‘what is your status?’”

Yousif | Aged 22 | Technician
Arrived in the UK aged 11.



SLOTH

“They are very stupid and very slow, especially with the application responses. Everything they do is incredibly slow and seems not very thorough or thoughtful.”

Oliver | Age 25 | Law student and part-time advisor | Arrived in the UK aged 11.

“I would say a sloth. Only because of how slow they are.”

April | Age 24 | Working full time | Arrived in the UK aged 8.

Home
Office



Overview of our findings: 'I was in a dark place. I lost hope'

“



Fiona Bawdon
journalist and
comms consultant,
We Belong

For most people, the 2012 Olympics opening ceremony was a moment of unity and celebration: a time when the UK came together as one, in all our rich, diverse and multicultural glory. For Shahmir, 21, it was his first experience of the Home Office's hostile environment.

A 13-year-old schoolboy at the time of London 2012, he was one of hundreds of London children picked to take part in the opening ceremony. *"I was thinking, wow! This is the biggest event, ever."* Then the ceremony organisers asked to see his British passport. *"That's when I realised being a migrant marked me out as different from my British classmates."*

Shahmir's story will not surprise anyone familiar with the insidious policies of the Home Office, and its labyrinthine, rigid, and torturously slow application processes.

Shahmir – who is not one of our 15 research interviewees but is treading the same path – came to the UK from Pakistan at the age of 5, with his parents and younger brother. By the time of the London Olympics, he'd already lived here well over half his life – yet it would be many more years before he and his family were finally able to regularise their immigration status. Shahmir has now been granted Limited Leave to Remain (LLR), but he will be in his 30s before he is eligible for British citizenship.

The immigration system not only robbed Shahmir of the chance to take part in a once-in-a-lifetime event when he was 13. Over time, it has also deprived his family of its financial stability and affected their mental and physical health: they ended up in £27,000 debt from paying Home Office and legal fees; while his mother endures chronic back pain from years of sleeping on the floor in their one-bedroom flat (they couldn't afford an additional bed). Shahmir says his little sister, who was born in the UK, can't run and skip like other children her age, as her mobility has been limited from having grown up in such cramped conditions.

Shahmir describes the toll on his mental health. *"The constant Home Office delays and uncertainty about my future in the UK led to me being put on antidepressants, and I had to attend therapy sessions, due to the dark place I was in. I felt there was nothing to look forward to – I lost a lot of hope."* ►

◀ Despite his difficult circumstances, Shahmir did well at school and won a place to study medicine. Having seen how hard his parents worked, he was keen to make them proud – but the hostile environment hadn't yet finished with him. Though by then Shahmir had LLR, his immigration status meant he did not qualify for a student loan. In another crushing blow, he was forced to give up his hard-won place at medical school.

Like every young migrant We Belong works with, Shahmir's story is unique, but the damage inflicted on his health and wellbeing by the 10-year LLR process is all too common. The government is unable to provide figures of how many others there are like him, who have grown up in the UK and are going through the same arduous process. According to research published by the Greater London Authority, there are more than 330,000 young people with insecure immigration status, which would include many that either have LLR or who would be eligible for it.

Hoping not to fall

The 15 young migrants interviewed for this research describe what it's like spending your 20s trying not to buckle under the ever-present, ever-escalating burden of Home Office fees (equivalent to £86 a month; and due to rise again in April 2021). They explain how it feels to reach young adulthood with the sense that you are “on probation” in the country you call home, and fearing you will never “be British enough”.

Six interviewees said they worried about their immigration status “every day”, not just around the time of the 30-month renewals. For Oliver, going through the 10-year LLR process was “like walking on a tightrope, just hoping not to fall”; while April likened it to a “dark cloud that's always over your head”.

Thirteen out of 15 interviewees said they were worried about the impact of the immigration process on their own long-term mental health; 14 out of 15 worried about the impact on the mental health of family members.

Asked what effect their most recent LLR application or renewal had on them, 10 reported changes in their sleep patterns (either sleeplessness or sleeping more); 11 reported crying; 12 reported feeling overwhelmed; 11 reported feeling worried, with a similar number feeling stressed; 9 felt scared; 11 felt insecure).

Other words they used to describe their feelings about LLR were: frustration; agitation; guilt; uncertainty; marginalised; apprehensive; disappointment; uncertainty; let down by the British government; unwelcome; angry; anxiety; low mood; tired; defeated; hopeless; racing thoughts (see page 20-21).

Interviewees also reported suffering physical symptoms that they associated with the stress of LLR: an ovarian cyst that flared up; chest pain; nausea; headaches; chronic insomnia prompting a visit to GP; a panic attack serious enough for an ambulance to be called; anxiety fuelling prescriptions for antidepressants. A number had sought counselling and therapy to help them cope (although the cost was a barrier for some). Most alarmingly, four reported thoughts of self-harm; six reported suicidal thoughts; one reported actual self-harm; and one, Zara, had attempted suicide.

Zara explained that there was one night when she “sank into a dark pit”, and took an overdose of her prescription medication. *“I was thinking, ‘if I actually go now, it all ends. I don’t have to deal with this ever again.’”* After being admitted to hospital, she was referred for therapy and put on a higher dose of antidepressants.

All 15 interviewees said the LLR process affected their feelings of identity and belonging, with 11 of them saying it had had a “huge impact”. Anu, 24, who was born in the UK, described the need to regularly renew LLR as “a literal reminder I don’t belong here. I really struggled to identify as British. The 10-year route triggered those feelings”.

And a 19-year-old, who arrived at the age of 12, said: *“I don’t feel completely secure in my being here. If I was to travel [abroad] anywhere, if something happens [to me], who is going to want to come and get me? Is it going to be the UK? I don’t think so. That little [biometric] card literally tells me, ‘You’re only allowed to work until 2022. And then you have to do it again; and then you have to do it again; and you have to do it again.’ I think the whole process is built to make you think you don’t completely belong here.”* ■

The impact of Limited Leave to Remain in numbers

Limited Leave to Remain has to be renewed every 30 months, and the Home Office warns that it may take six months to respond (though many applicants report waiting far longer). We Belong's findings suggest that the frequency of applications, combined with the length of time the process takes, is acutely damaging to applicants' mental and physical health and wellbeing. The 15 young migrants interviewed described suffering a raft of physical symptoms and behavioural changes, which they believed were triggered by their most recent Home Office application or renewal.

Interviewees were asked to name their strongest feelings in relation to their most recent Home Office application, which resulted in a worrying, if predictable, list: depression, anxiety, sadness, disappointment, let down by British government, fear, stress, hopelessness, uncertainty, guilt, frustration, agitation, apprehension, marginalised, anger, nervousness.

Even once their application was accepted, and they knew their status in the UK was secure for another 30 months, the negative feelings continued, suggesting the immigration system is perpetually distorting the lives of young migrants. As Carol, 25, puts it: *"When I got the email saying my leave [to remain] had been renewed, I let out a breath. It wasn't a moment of, 'Yay! Let's celebrate!' I'm glad my application was accepted, but it was straight back on the horse again."*

None of the 15 participants said their negative feelings went away entirely once their application was accepted; over half (8) said their feelings stayed the same; 5 said the feelings went away "to a small extent"; only 3 said they went away "to a large extent".

13 participants agreed with the statement: "I am worried about the impact of the immigration process on my own long-term mental health."

14 agreed with the statement: "I am worried about the impact of the immigration process on the long-term mental health of members of my family", with 2 having concerns for their mums, and one expressing her concerns for her mum and her brother.

14 agreed that they were worried about the impact of the immigration process on the long-term mental health of other young migrants that they knew.

6 agreed with the statement: "I worry about my immigration status every day"; 8 worried about it "from time to time"; only 1 said he "rarely" worried about his status.

None agreed with the statement: "I never worry about my immigration status."

7 reported changes in eating habits (under or overeating)	6 reported headaches or nausea	10 reported changes in sleeping habits (insomnia or sleeping more)
11 reported changes in energy levels (lethargy or hyperactivity)	9 found it harder to concentrate	5 felt hypervigilant
8 did not want to socialise or see friends	5 did not want to do usual activities , such as hobbies or sports	11 reported crying or feeling sad
12 reported feeling nervous	10 felt unsafe	11 felt insecure
12 felt overwhelmed by the process	8 felt hopeless	8 said they felt depressed
11 felt worried	11 felt stressed	5 felt angry
4 had thoughts of selfharm	1 had selfharm	6 had suicidal thoughts
	1 made a suicide attempt (requiring hospital treatment for an overdose)	

Mental and physical health: 'The dark cloud always over your head'

We Belong's Mental Health Check exposes the toll that the 10-year Limited Leave to Remain (LLR) process is taking on the mental – and by extension physical – health of young migrants who are on the path to becoming citizens of this country.

April, 24, who arrived in the UK aged 8 and now works full time, says: *"It's just always there. I feel like that will be the same for every migrant. It's the dark cloud that's just always over your head."*

Thirteen of the 15 interviewees said they worry about the impact of the immigration process on their own long-term mental health; 14 said they worried about its impact on the long-term mental health of family members (with three specifically mentioning their mums); see page 20-21.

Living with LLR means a decade of living with unrelenting uncertainty. This is exacerbated by the frequency of renewals (every 30 months); the ever-increasing and unpredictable cost (currently £2,593); and the long delays in processing applications (the Home Office warns it may take up to six months, but waits of a year or more are not uncommon).

For young people whose life and future in the country they call home depend on the outcome of each and every LLR application, the longer the Home Office takes, the greater the anguish. Business student Seyi, 24, who arrived in the UK aged 8, says: *"My recent renewal was one of the most stressful times I've ever gone through. It was a process of waiting and waiting and waiting."*

He described the moment he realised how much his life would be shaped by LLR: *"It dawned on me that this won't stop until I'm over 30 years old; that I can't have a normal 20s. All the stuff that you want to do, you have to let it go. You can't do it."*

Full-time worker Carol, 25, who arrived in the UK aged 11, had a similar realisation during her Home Office application: *"One night, I was talking to my mum and I just started crying. I was like, how many times do I have to do this?"* And Anu, 24, who was born in the UK and was temping before the pandemic, says: *"It just keeps spinning in my head: this is what my 20s are for?"* Oliver describes having from gone from *"having so much hope, drive, passion, and motivation"* when he was younger and understood less about his immigration status, to now feeling as though everything is *"shut off"*. *"It is very damning mentally. It spirals into a place of feeling no hope, no light, no passage out."*

'I feel overwhelmed all the time'

The LLR process leaves Seyi feeling *"exhausted"* and fearing for his future in the UK. *"You see your friends moving on with their life normally, and you are just questioning, 'I have to go through this every two-and-a-half years?' You're just thinking, 'I can't move on, because I don't have the certainty that I'm going to see these people that I'm talking to next year.'"*

BTEC student Rachel, 18, who arrived in the UK aged 11, says: *"I feel overwhelmed all the time."* There are times, she says, when she will start crying and be unable to stop (*"kind of hysterics"*). Michelle, 26, described feeling *"trapped"*, *"stagnant"* and *"like there was this big weight on me"*. Zara says: *"You can't go through this [LLR] process without being overwhelmed. If it's not the emotional side of things, it's the financial side. It just gets over your head."*

Law student and part-time advisor Oliver, 25, who arrived in the UK aged 11, had the opposite reaction. He says he developed “a survivor’s mentality”, which meant though he felt sad about his situation, he was unable to cry. “You lock yourself off from your emotions completely, every day.” This has had a lasting effect: “I feel this [LLR] has cast a shadow over my ability to feel emotions in general. I have almost lost the ability to feel happy.”

As we said in We Belong’s 2019 report, ‘Normality is a Luxury’, if the fees for any other government service escalated as rapidly as the cost of LLR, “it would spark a public and political outcry”. Since then, the cost of each LLR application has risen by 69%, to £2,593, up from £2,033 in 2019 (see page 9). The cost of LLR has increased 331% since 2014, with another increase due in April 2021. At current levels, that equates to each applicant needing to save £86 a month just to cover their LLR fees. For families with more than one member on the LLR path, the sums are even more crippling.

And even when an LLR application is approved by the Home Office, it brings little peace of mind, knowing the next renewal is only 30 months away. Seyi says when his was granted: “It was just like, OK. Now I need to worry about how I’m going to save up for two-and-a-half years.”

Student Jemma, 25, who arrived in the UK aged 2, says: “I don’t think I’m ever happy when I put in a renewal. I’m only happy when I get it, because my future is confirmed for another two-and-a-half years. But that’s not really a future is it? It’s only two-and-a-half years.”

‘Everything can be taken away from you’

Although the precariousness of their lives in the UK is never far from their minds, it is during the time of LLR renewals that the young people’s stress levels become most intense.

Science student David, 21, who arrived in the UK aged 9, says his most recent application “reminded me that I am not like everyone else. I’m not really safe, so I’ve got to have my wits about me at all times”. Michael, 22, arrived in the UK

aged 11 and was working in a bar before being furloughed. He says he was “just scared of being separated from my family” by the Home Office – a fear echoed by student teacher Anwar, 25, who arrived in the UK aged 9. He says: “You go into a spiral of thinking you are not going to be allowed to stay in the country. You’re constantly in a state of worry. Everything can be taken away from you.”

Jemma recently renewed her LLR for the third time. She says: “I definitely suffer bouts of depression when I’m due to renew. My insomnia just shoots up like that! Sometimes I just don’t sleep at all.” Jemma’s next LLR application in 30 months could be her last, as, 30 months after that, she will be eligible to apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain, where she would finally be recognised as permanently settled in the UK. By that point, Jemma will be in her early 30s and have been living in this country for more than three decades.

For Oliver, waiting for the Home Office’s response was like “walking on a tightrope, just hoping not to fall. You don’t know what’s going to happen. You’re very, very scared the whole time. Every single day you wake up you are just nervous”.

Apprentice Zara, 19, arrived in the UK aged 12. She describes how she “would start to cry” the minute her head touched the pillow. “I couldn’t go to bed at night because that quiet just set off this emotional rollercoaster. I couldn’t sleep at that point.” Michael says his insomnia was so bad he sought help from his GP, who referred him for counselling. “They gave me tips on what to do. I had to start getting out of the house. I had to have a routine that would allow me to fall asleep.”

Worries about her Home Office application affected Zara’s days as well as her nights. Normally “a bubbly person”, who enjoys school and “loves my books”, she found there were days when she “just physically couldn’t get up in the morning”. “Sometimes I would get to school and I couldn’t speak to people. I just couldn’t get the energy to say anything in class. I just couldn’t handle it. The idea of actually just going out in public was petrifying.” ►

◀ Carol had a similar experience: *"I stopped speaking to people," she says. "I found it easier to just retreat, I guess. I didn't really want to talk to anyone, unless it was urgent and necessary."*

April began to have panic attacks at the time of her first Home Office application, although it wasn't until years later during therapy that she and her therapist made the connection between her mental state and the LLR process. The most recent attack happened when she was socialising with friends (*"it came out of nowhere"*), and was serious enough for an ambulance to be called: *"I felt like I was going to die; my heart was going to burst."*

Zara also ended up at A&E – but in her case it was after taking an overdose of her prescription antidepressants. *"I was thinking, 'if I actually go now, it all ends. I don't have to deal with this [LLR] ever again,'" she says.*

Having to pay the exorbitant Home Office fees has left many young people and their families only being able to afford overcrowded, insecure and unsuitable living accommodation, thus creating additional stress.

At the time of Zara's overdose her family was living in a one-bedroom flat – *"there was not any space to get peace and quiet"*. She relives what happened: *"One night I just couldn't sleep. Everyone went to bed and I was just crying when no one could see me. I brought out the whole packet of what I was taking at the time. Once I started crying, I'd take one. I couldn't breathe as well; I just felt like my whole body was shutting off. I [took] another one, another one. I think I blacked out, and I don't remember what happened after that."*

She was taken to A&E and then referred for counselling, and her antidepressant dosage was increased to try to keep her emotions on more of an even keel.

Zara's was, mercifully, the only actual suicide attempt. A number of other interviewees have described having suicidal feelings, though none had not acted on them.

Michelle, 26, who arrived in the UK aged 11, says: *"I felt hopeless, because what's the point of actually living? But it was just a thought. It wasn't ever something that I could actually do because it's against my religion."* The final-year psychology student says: *"I kept consoling myself with the idea that God has a plan for my life, so that kept me going."*

Anu also had suicidal thoughts: *"I was contemplating it, too."*

And Rachel says: *"I had this week that I was just lying in my bed and I didn't want to even live, to be honest."* She adds: *"I felt like something's happening in my life I can't really deal with, so I felt those suicidal thoughts. I was trying to find coping mechanisms to help me through."* She admits that on one occasion, she had self-harmed.

Your life in Home Office hands

These young people have little trust in the Home Office, or faith in the fairness of the process. Oliver says: *"Your life is literally in the hands of someone who is in front of a desk and, depending on how they start their day, you don't know how or what they are going to think of your application."*

Seyi was thrown into panic when his renewal, which he believed should have been straightforward, took many months longer to process than his original LLR application. He was also angry at paying so much money for such poor service from the Home Office, knowing he was powerless to do anything about it: *"They never send a letter saying 'we're still processing your application', you have to chase them up. I felt really belittled because they knew that no matter how long they take, we're just going to suck it up."*

April also went from panic to anger when her application was finally granted with no explanation for the agonising delay. *"There was no issue with my application, no mistakes, nothing. Everything was perfect. You [Home Office] had 14 months doing what exactly? Why did it take you so long to reply to me?"*

Seyi felt he was “not human” to the Home Office. *“I understand, I’m not a citizen – but I’m contributing towards your tax, towards the economy. You’re happy with that, but you’re not happy for me to integrate into society. I don’t understand that, it just doesn’t make sense to me.”*

‘Lingering pain’

Unsurprisingly for many of the interviewees, the emotional pain caused by LLR was accompanied by physical symptoms.

Seyi gets a pain in his chest when he thinks about the renewal process: *“Just like that lingering pain. I get that all the time when I think about this. You know sometimes you just can’t breath? I get that.”* Other family members have also been affected: *“My mum can’t sleep at night. She’s got iron deficiency through the [LLR] process and high blood pressure as well.”*

For Carol, the “not sleeping and not eating properly” prompted by the stress of LLR caused an ovarian cyst to flare up, resulting in a hospital stay of nearly two weeks. *“The doctor was like, ‘if I don’t find a way to stop whatever it is you’re doing which is causing this [cyst], we’re going to have to operate’ – and he knew that I didn’t want to have the operation.”*

Michael reported having multiple headaches *“because you’re overthinking a lot”.*

‘I’ll just have to therapy myself’

A number of interviewees had either been referred to or referred themselves for counselling to help deal with the stress caused by the LLR process.

Anu had paid for private counselling, as the NHS waiting list was too long but had to give up after a few months because of the cost.

April had therapy for her anxiety and panic attacks via a mental health charity but discontinued the sessions: *“The healthcare system doesn’t know how to deal with these kinds of things when it relates to black or brown people.”* She was now having counselling via an

app, which allowed her to specify the kind of therapist she wanted (*“you can say if you want a woman or if you want someone that’s black”*), and which she was finding flexible enough to fit around work, and (at £50 a month) affordable. *“When you’re having a moment, you can just drop them a message, and they get back to you. You can speak to them as often as you want. I find it amazing.”*

Oliver says he was “a bit stubborn” and initially held out against having counselling, which he puts down to having just started university and *“wanting to do well and make myself feel like a normal human being”*. He relented after a while, however, and counselling has helped him *“decipher what’s going on in my head”*. It also helped him unlock his shut-down emotions and to realise *“I don’t have to run or feel nervous every time I’m next to a person who is in a position of authority,”* he says. *“I don’t have to feel weird about going into a bank and asking for something and feel like I will be rejected. Counselling has definitely made me think more about that.”*

Carol felt she needed counselling, but was *“stuck between a rock and a hard place”*: she couldn’t afford to pay privately, but was concerned that seeking help through the NHS might have repercussions. *“There’s just this fear I have of going to the GP and saying, ‘I’m not feeling mentally fit’: that kind of stuff goes in your file. I don’t want them to hold that against me. Call me paranoid, but I’d rather have a friend refer me to a private therapist, but I can’t afford that. I’ll just have to therapy myself.”* ■

Belonging and identity: 'Never British enough'

Although UK prime minister Boris Johnson and other senior politicians talk about the importance of migrants integrating into UK society, our government continues to preside over an immigration system that has the opposite effect.

Participants in We Belong's Mental Health Check describe how the cost, complexity and 10-year duration of the Limited Leave to Remain (LLR) process leaves them feeling stigmatised and isolated from their British peers.

All but three of our interviewees have lived in the UK at least half their life, but even those who previously had taken their Britishness and belonging in the UK for granted, found themselves questioning their identity as a result of dealings with the Home Office. In Michael's words, he feared he might "never be British enough".

Technician Yousif, 22, who arrived from Iraq aged 11, says: "I've lived in the UK from such a young age. I feel I am part of British society – but it's just the immigration system that does not want me to be part of British society. You don't feel British sometimes because they don't want you to be British and that's the problem."

Anu spoke about the toll of having to make Home Office applications every 30 months and her lack of trust in the process: "I have literal reminders that I don't belong here. Having to renew constantly is a reminder, and because there is no certainty that I am going to complete this [LLR] route that's also a huge reminder."

Zara says the process is designed "to make you think you don't completely belong here"; Anwar says its intention is "to make you feel like you're different".

Oliver describes 10 years of LLR as like being "on probation". He says: "I don't feel accepted here. I feel almost like the country always reminds you that you are not citizens, so you never completely feel you belong." Jemma also says: "I feel like I am not welcome in the country I call home."

April puts it more bluntly: "They don't want you. They don't claim you." She adds: "I went to primary school here, I grew up here, my friends are here, I have most of my memories here. So you think, 'this is my home. This is where I belong'. From the age of 8 to now 25, this is all I've known – but this is also the place that is trying to push me out."

"You're literally trying to fight so hard to stay in a country that you think that 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 in the same breath, that country obviously doesn't want you." As a result, she says: "It makes it hard to structure how you identify yourself."

Michael fears that, even if he completes the 10-year LLR route and finally becomes a citizen, he may still be seen as an "outsider". "It's not because I don't want to feel British, it's because I'm not seen as British. Even when I have a passport, it's never going to be, 'oh, yeah, he's one of us'."

Zara echoes Michael's fears about the Home Office's capriciousness – *"I could apply the next time and they wouldn't give it to me, because you've heard of situations like that"* – but believes a British passport will change things for her: *"The feeling that this could all get taken away from me any day will never go away until I have a red passport in my hands with my name and my picture on it."*

Michael says he feels less accepted the longer he has lived here: *"When I was younger, I always felt that once you've lived here long enough, once you've assimilated, once you've grown up, once you've got friends here, you've got family here, you become British. But as I've grown older and I've seen what the world is really like, those feelings started to change. Maybe, no matter how hard I work, no matter how much I assimilate, I will never be classed as British."*

Anu describes similar feelings. *"At the start of the 10-year route, then learning about the hostile environment and the ways in which our government has sought ways to ostracise migrants, and just ensuring they don't belong, I grew more distant from my British identity. I really struggle to identify as British."*

Anwar agrees the application process is designed *"to make you feel different"*, but for him, it did the opposite, making him *"realise how integrated you have become – which is quite weird, if you think about it"*. He adds: *"In your head, you're thinking, 'why do I have to go through all this bureaucracy?' because you feel like you belong. It has a way of changing how you see yourself."*

Politics student Gabriel King, 20, who arrived in the UK aged 11, thinks the UK's poor treatment of young migrants will leave a lasting legacy. *"You're essentially creating citizens of people who feel a slight sense of resentment towards the country, and the slight sense of resentment is going to be with their offspring, who are going to grow up in this country and be the backbone of this country. Their loyalty, their sense of identity, will always be split. Maybe we'll see a decline in patriotism."*

'Thank you for your money'

The ever-increasing fees that young migrants have to pay left Gabriel King and other young interviewees feeling like cash cows whose only value to the UK is as a lucrative source of revenue. *"You're investing another two-and-a-half years in a land that, next time you have to renew, will just reject you and say, 'this is not your home. Your contributions to society are irrelevant. Thank you for your money.'"*

Oliver describes LLR as *"a route which costs a lot of money and treats you like you're not supposed to have it"*. For Seyi, the message from the Home Office was *"we want your money, but we don't want you here"*.

The ever-increasing cost of LLR to unaffordable levels made him feel that *"they're trying to set people up to fail. But these people [migrants] can actually contribute something to society"*. He says the pandemic has shown that migrants – including his mum, who is a key worker – are *"one of the strongest backbones in this country, because they do so much"*.

Matthew, 27, who arrived in the UK aged 11, describes similar feelings. Alone among the participants, Matthew – who is working full time – is one step away from eligibility for British citizenship (having been granted Indefinite Leave to Remain). But the UK's belated acceptance of him is not a source of pride for him, as it is based solely on having paid *"ridiculous amounts of money"*, rather than anything more meaningful, he says. *"It's a piece of paper that I paid for. It wasn't given to me on some sort of moral grounds, or for the merit of being a good citizen, or to help make an inclusive society. It was just an economic project by the Home Secretary to pounce on those vulnerable people, and I was just one of those numbers."*

For others, the desire to be formally recognised as belonging to the UK remains strong. Zara says: *"I wish I could say I was British. I really wish I could."* And Jemma says: *"I just love this country so much. Even the food I cook is mostly English. Nigerian dishes and me, we don't get along that much."* ■

Self-help and ways to cope: 'Running has been my escape'

The 15 interviewees were asked what practical ways they had found that helped them cope with the stress of life on the 10-year LLR path. The section 'Mental and physical health: The dark cloud always over your head' looked at the role that professional help, in the form of medication and therapy, played for some of them (often after an initial reluctance to seek medical help), but informal support and self-help have also been helpful in managing participants' stress levels, particularly when making a renewal or application.

As Anwar says: *"You've done everything you can do in your power by the time you send your application off, so my view is to just deal with that anxiety."* For him, this was a combination of physical activity – *"running has been my escape"* – and inactivity – *"meditating is my way of staying calm and positive"*. Jemma found a meditation app useful: *"They have loads of really calming music on it, so I just listen to that for five minutes if I'm feeling too much is going on."*

Other activities cited as useful for coping were keeping a journal and other forms of writing; reading; coding; music and knitting (*"Once you get the hang of it and can knit without looking, it becomes relaxing"*). Michelle, who has a flair for design, would create websites and flyers for small local businesses. She says: *"People kept referring me to other people, so that helped with taking my mind off it. I think I was quite fortunate in that sense that I had a little bit of money."*

'We Belong makes me feel safe'

Involvement with We Belong was also mentioned as a source of comfort that made young migrants feel less isolated. One said that going to We Belong meetings *"helped me grow as a person, and not feel ashamed"*. For Michael, We Belong made him *"feel safe"*,

while supporting We Belong's work *"constantly motivates me to do something; to give; to be selfless. Volunteering has definitely made me feel better, because I am giving up my time, giving up my energy. It's definitely rewarding"*. We Belong was described as being like a community and a family.

Support from actual family was also vital in some cases. April says: *"Apart from counselling, the biggest [support] is having my sister and my brother to talk to and just have them be someone I can turn to, because obviously they understand 100%. They see the whole picture, so I can be open and brutal and honest."* Her therapist had given her tips on how to deal with her regular panic attacks, which she had shared with friends and her siblings, *"so if I do have one of those in front of them they're able to calm me down"*.

After a really difficult period, where she had spent days crying at home, Zara found activities with a sibling helpful. *"I started going swimming with my younger sister. I think there was a mental change in me to get going, and that life didn't have to stop. Even if it was this one thing that's holding me back, there were other things I could do as well."*

For some, however, their families were not able to help, as they were having their own difficulties coping with the toll of LLR. Rachel says: *"Usually, my mum would feel depressed. Now, it's me as well, which makes it hard because we struggle to support each other. We stay depressed and hopeless."*

'Going to church helped a lot'

Zara, along with a number of others, drew great comfort from her religious faith. During a difficult time after her suicide attempt, a friend had invited Zara to attend her church. *"I just thought, why would I want to stay at home crying, when I could go to church? I went to church that day. I felt a whole lot better."* She felt her faith had deepened considerably as a result: *"I got quite close to God around that point. Going to church did help a lot."*

Anu had decided to move to a new church, as a way of taking some control over her life: *"I just figured there are some things out of my control. Whatever is within my control, I am going to try to change it to ensure that it's more beneficial for me, and I'm in the right space."*

Michelle says when she had suicidal thoughts: *"I kept consoling myself with the idea that God has a plan for my life, so that kept me going."* David also took comfort from his belief that *"God is in control"*. Matthew said he had *"quickly learned"* not to put his faith in the government to *"meet me in the middle"*. He says: *"My destiny is not in their hands. I am a Christian, so I went God's way."*

Rachel credited a combination of *"breathing exercises to some extent, but mainly I think religion and the connectivity with God really helped me deal with everything"*.

Church was a frequent source not just of spiritual comfort and for some, also of practical help, including fund-raising for LLR fees. Michelle says: *"My faith in God really helped. My church and my pastor were so supportive, they used to give me money every now and then. I had people that noticed I was quite good at admin so they would call me to help with admin stuff."* In Zara's case, her church introduced her to a solicitor who helped with her Home Office application. ■

We Belong's five-point plan for reform

We believe the immigration system and Home Office processes are in urgent need of reform, and welcome our government's announcement of a review. Our recommendations, below, are restricted to the reform of Limited Leave to Remain (LLR), which is where We Belong's experience and expertise lies. This should not, however, be taken as an endorsement of other elements of the immigration system – far from it. We believe a widespread radical and urgent rethink of Home Office operations is needed to create a system that is trusted, humane and sustainable.

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 is overlong, punitive, and limits the life chances of young people who have grown up in the UK. The financial and other constraints imposed by the 10-year process means many young migrants reaching early adulthood are denied the opportunity to realise their ambitions, causing prolonged financial and emotional stress. Ten years of multiple applications and multiple fees only increases the likelihood that young people will inadvertently fall out of status and have their lives ruined as a result. A five-year LLR path to settlement would be fairer and give us parity with other migrant groups.

② An end to the profit element of LLR for children and young people under 25.

We believe it is deeply damaging to the individuals concerned 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 financial burden, caused by the obligation to pay escalating and unpredictable Home Office fees. Limiting the LLR fee paid to the actual cost of processing each application would automatically lead to tapering-off of fees for LLR renewal applications.

③ LLR 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.

The current means-tested fee waiver system exists in name only and should be overhauled. Home Office figures show that upwards of three-quarters of applications are rejected. The burden of evidence of destitution should be lowered, and fee waivers should be extended to all child LLR, ILR, and citizenship applicants. In addition, we call for 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.

The Immigration Health Surcharge, introduced in 2015, is intended to ensure that people who are in the UK temporarily pay towards the cost of the NHS. We believe there should be an urgent review to consider introducing an exemption 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. Reforms of this kind would end the 'double tax' paid by many people with LLR, because they (or their families) are working and already paying towards the cost of the NHS through taxation.

Home Office

