



Living Online and Covid Impact

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the individuals and families who responded to the surveys for these studies. No identifying information for any individual or family has been shared.

Introduction

This study was created by **Reunite Families UK** in response to calls for evidence for two parliamentary inquiries:

i/ Living online: the long-term impact on wellbeing

(<https://committees.parliament.uk/work/742/living-online-the-longterm-impact-on-wellbeing/>)
run by the House of Lords Covid-19 Committee.

ii/ Covid: lessons learnt (<https://committees.parliament.uk/work/657/coronavirus-lessons-learnt/>)
run jointly by the Health and Social Care Committee and Science and Technology Committee

The Minimum Income Requirement for spousal visas was introduced in the UK in 2012. As documented by the All-Party Parliament Group for Immigration report 2013 (<https://appgmigration.org.uk/family-migration-inquiry-2013/>) and Children's Commissioner for England's report 2015 (<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2015/09/09/skype-families/>) this has resulted in the enforced division of thousands of British citizens from their non-EEA partners and families in the subsequent eight years, either temporarily as they work through the spousal visa process (for example, when the British citizen returns from overseas or applies from within the UK) or permanently as they work through the immigration system.

This group of people have therefore anticipated in many cases the family division created by the Covid-19 pandemic with close partner and familial relationships conducted largely 'online' for months or years. As such, this group of people is uniquely placed to act as 'canaries in the coalmine' and predict the long-term effects of families who may have experienced similar conditions as a consequence of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. Participants self-selected among members of online forums devoted to families affected by this issue (largely 'Reunite Families UK' and 'I Love My Foreign Spouse' Facebook groups, in addition to Twitter and other social media).

Two surveys were conducted during October and November 2020. The first, *'Living Online: Impacts on families divided by the UK immigration system'*, concerned itself with all families who may have experienced division, whether now or in the past, and looked at the impacts on their physical, mental, emotional and financial health and the impact on the quality of their relationships. The second, *'Coronavirus Impact Survey'*, focused specifically on those families who had made an application for a visa during the Covid-19 pandemic. We will consider the outcomes of each of these surveys in turn.

Study 1: Living Online – Summary Responses

This survey concerned itself with families who had experienced separation as a consequence of the UK's immigration system, whether that separation was ongoing or in the past.

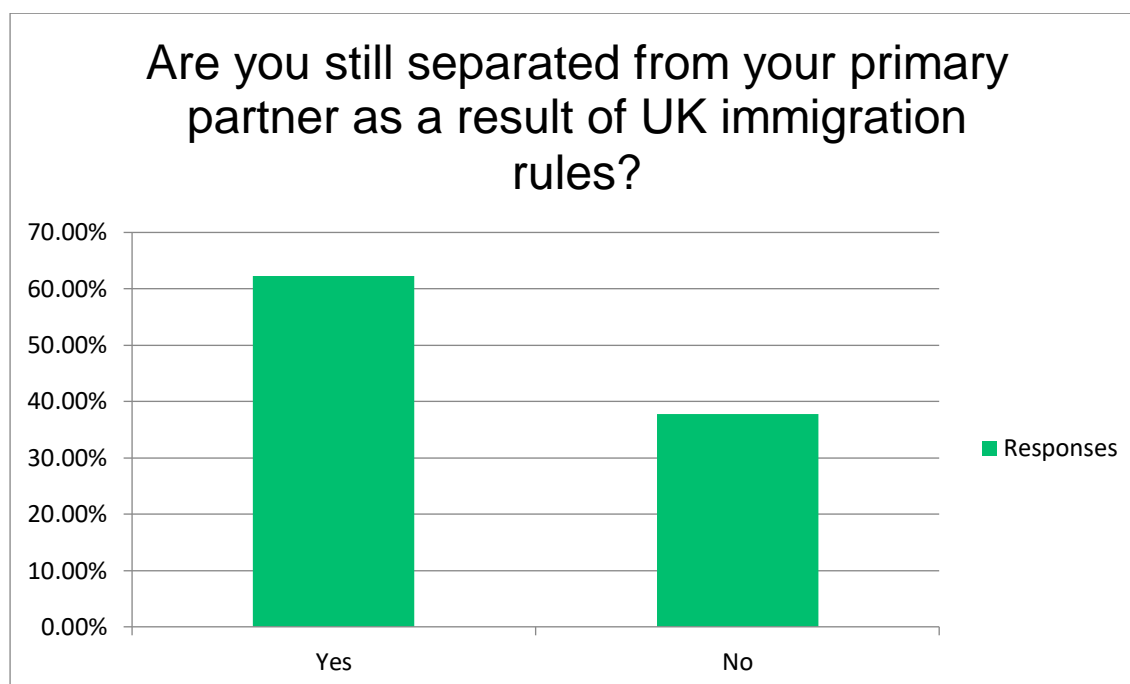
By 14th November 2020, the survey had elicited 53 responses, producing a good range of different experiences.

Baselining

The first set of questions to this survey were designed to establish a baseline for the current situation of the respondents:

1a/ Are you still separated from your primary partner as a result of UK immigration rules?

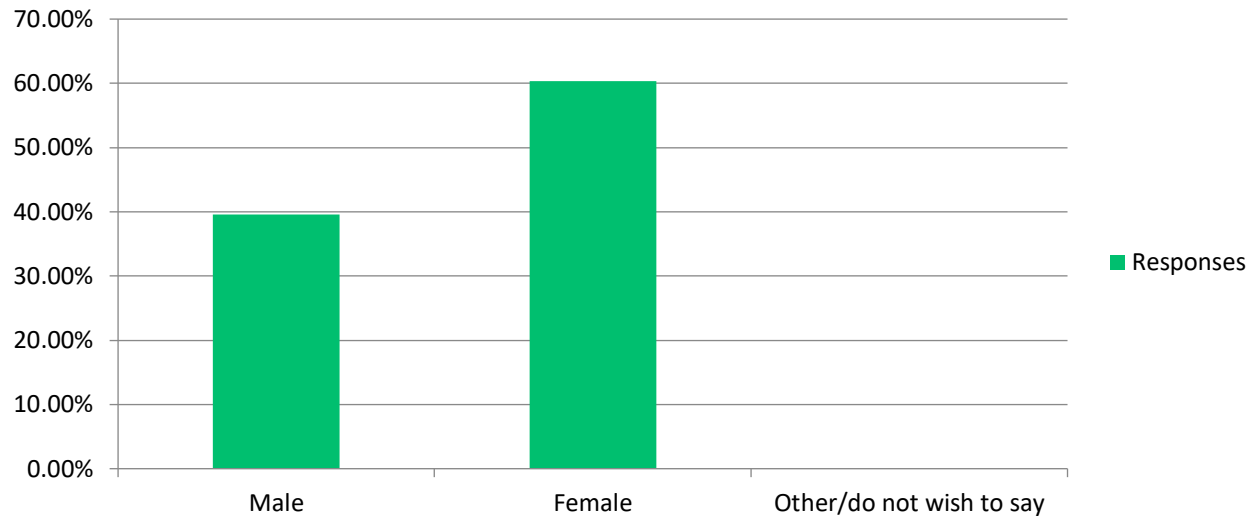
62% of our respondents were experiencing ongoing separation, with 38% no longer separated.



1b/ What is the sex/gender of the UK partner in your relationship?

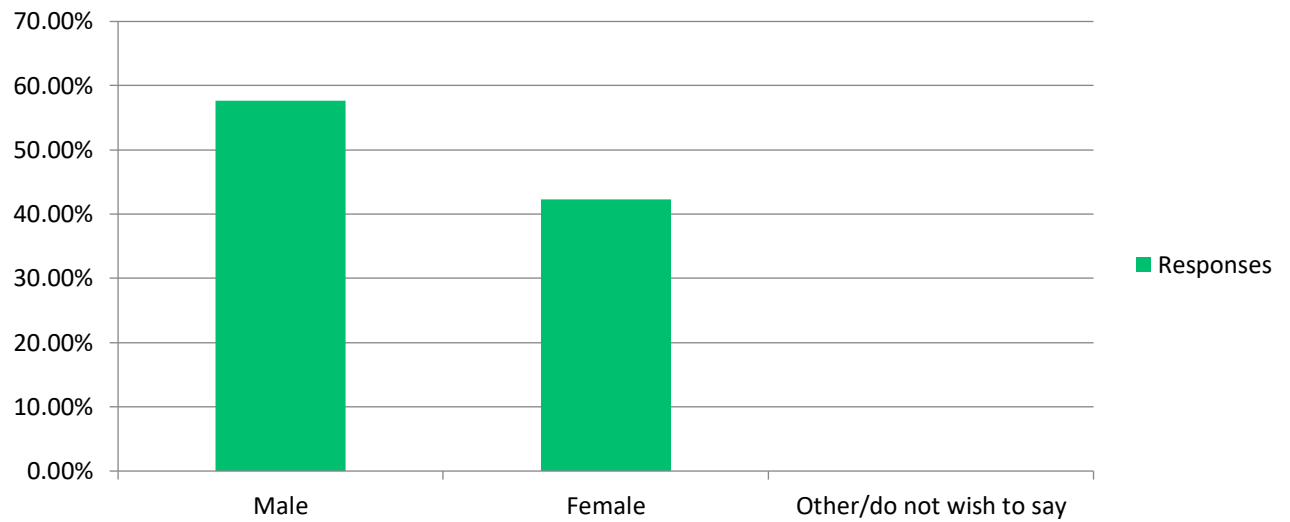
40% of our respondents stated that the UK partner was male, 60% that the UK partner was female (while these numbers are close, this tallies with previous studies' findings that UK women find it harder to meet the MIR due to either the wages gap or family care commitments; however it is still close enough to indicate that very many families, including those with male UK partners, experience some degree of separation because of, for example, the requirement to gather six months' worth of employment income while in the UK).

What is the sex/gender of the UK partner in your relationship?



1c/ What is the sex/gender of the non-UK partner in your relationship?

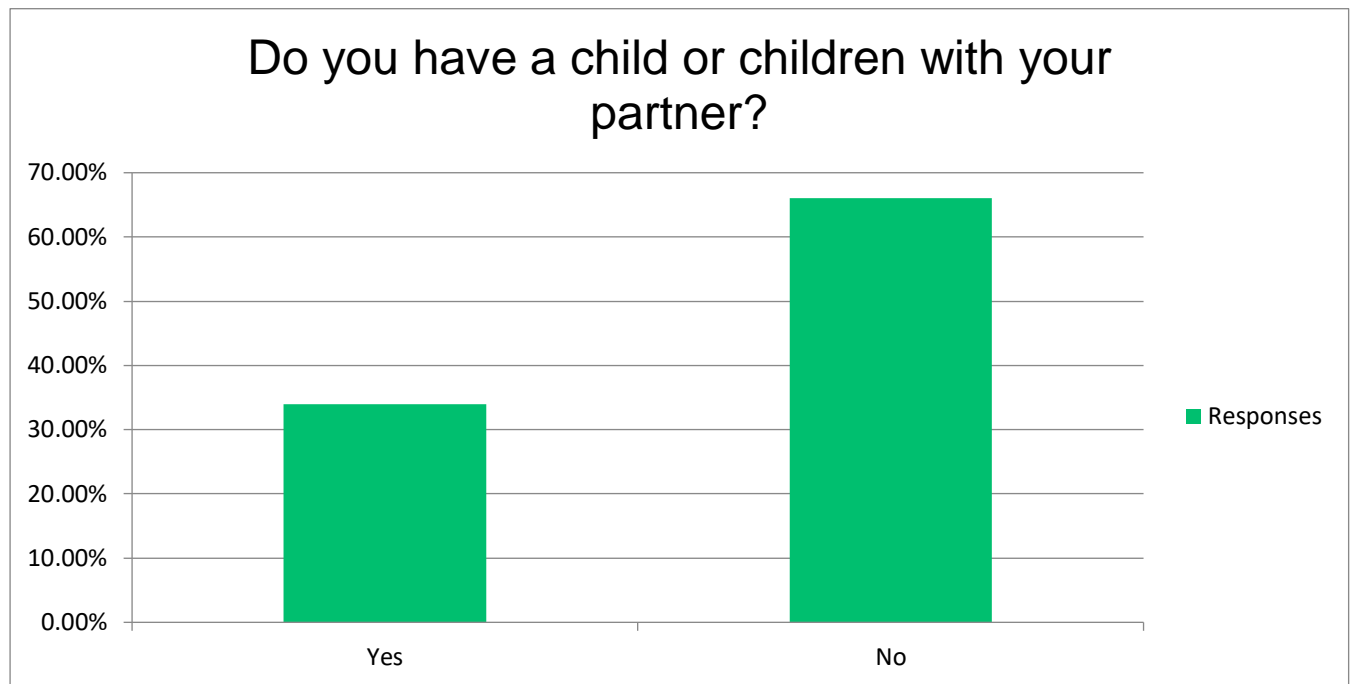
What is the sex/gender of the non-UK partner in your relationship?



58% of our respondents stated that the non-UK partner was male, 42% that the non-UK partner was female.

1d/ Do you have a child or children with your partner?

The impact on children was of particular interest to us. 34% of our respondents stated they had a child or children with their partner, 66% did not.



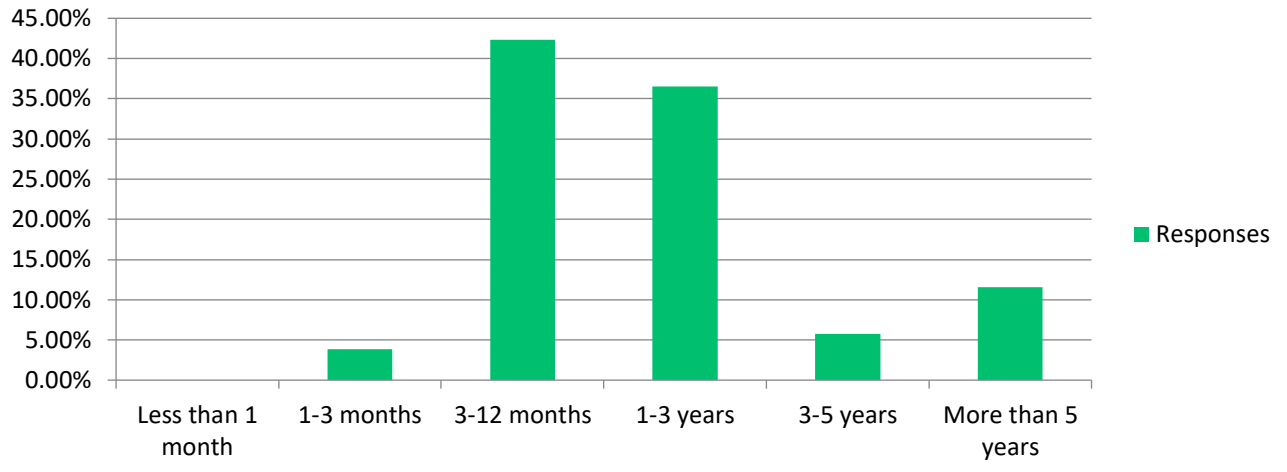
1e/ What is the nationality of the non-UK partner in your relationship?

As might be expected from a group of people with global connections, the responses here were highly diverse, with partners from Albania, Algeria, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Ghana, Guinea, India, Indonesia, Jamaica, Japan, Kenya, Lebanon, Libya, Mexico, Morocco, Pakistan, Palestine, the Philippines, Serbia, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Syria, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda, and the USA. The most common single nationalities of the non-UK partner were USA, Turkey and Indonesia (with 3 or more responses each), with no one single nationality or geographical group dominating.

1f/ How long was your separation from your primary partner? (If your separation is ongoing, how long has it been to date?)

None of our respondents had experienced a separation of less than 1 month. 4% experience separation between 1 and 3 months, 42% between 3 and 12 months, 37% between 1 and 3 years, 6% between 3 and 5 years, and 12% (incredibly) of 5 years or more. The most common separation period was therefore between 3 months and 3 years.

How long was your separation from your primary partner? (If your separation is ongoing, how long has it been to date?)



Impacts

The next set of questions focused on the impact of the separation on various aspects of the family's health and relationships. As documented in the September 2020 e-book 'Kept Apart: couples and families separated by the UK immigration system' (<https://www.reunitefamiliesuk.co.uk/kept-apart-project>), individuals reported physical, mental and emotional impacts of the separation (physical impacts including self-neglect such as weight gain or alcohol misuse and associated issues, mental impacts including issues with mood, anxiety, depression and self-esteem, relationship impacts with for example friends or family members unable to understand the ordeal). This part of the survey aimed to quantify these impacts.

Reflecting the findings in the 'Kept Apart' book, the impacts were measured on a self-reported 5 points scale as follows:

Terrible – likely lifelong impact (the worst possible)

Very negative – but possible to overcome with support

Negative – a setback but able to overcome

Neither negative nor positive, or mixed

Positive – it helped you/them become a stronger person (some of our respondents, particularly those whose separation was in the past, found that indeed it had some benefits in making them more capable and sympathetic individuals)

1g/ Please rate the impact of this separation on the physical health of your family

Physical health impact on the UK partner in the relationship:

Terrible (likely lifelong impact): 26%

Very negative: 28%

Negative: 38%

Neutral or mixed: 6%

Positive: 0%

Not applicable: 2%

(Median response: between 'Very negative' and 'Negative')

Physical health impact on the non-UK partner in the relationship:

Terrible (likely lifelong impact): 25%

Very negative: 28%

Negative: 30%

Neutral or mixed: 13%

Positive: 0%

Not applicable: 4%

(Median response: between 'Very negative' and 'Negative')

Physical health impact on the child(ren) in the relationship:

Terrible (likely lifelong impact): 9%

Very negative: 8%

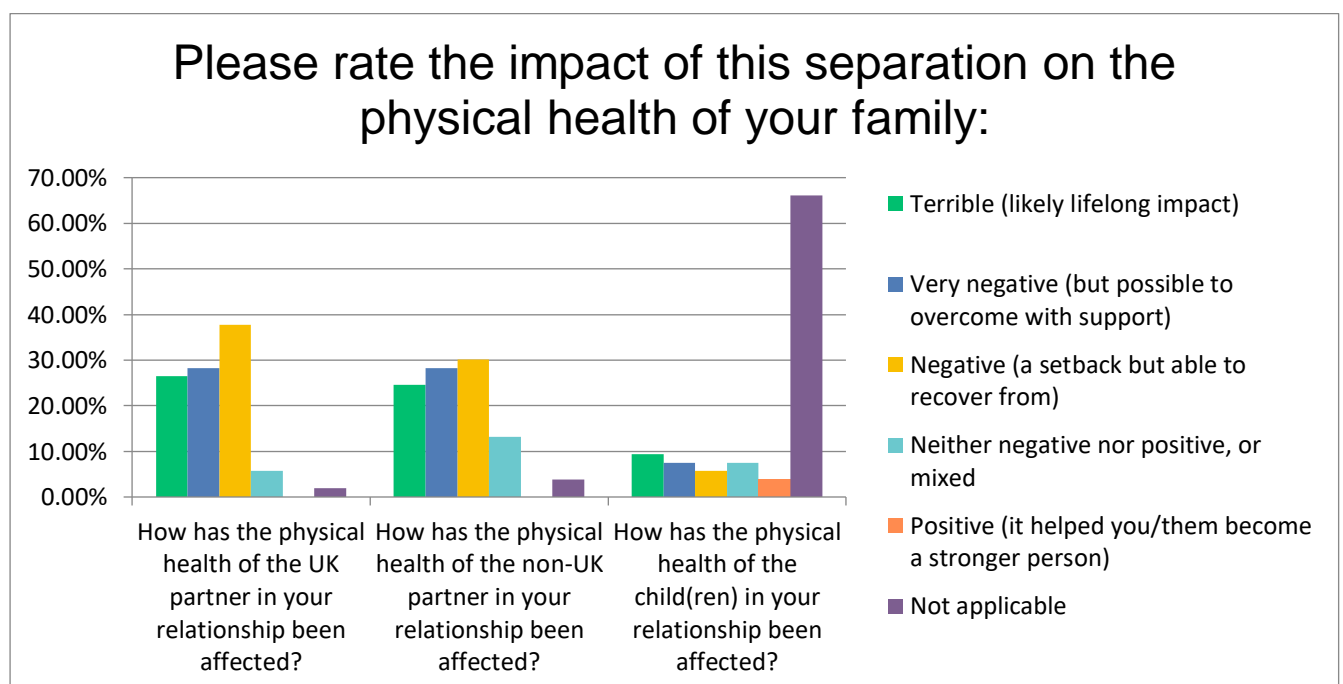
Negative: 6%

Neutral or mixed: 8%

Positive: 4%

Not applicable: 66%

(Median response for those with children: 'Negative' though with responses more spread across the spectrum)



1h/ Please rate the impact of this separation on the mental health of your family

Mental health impact on the UK partner in the relationship:

Terrible (likely lifelong impact): 32%

Very negative: 34%

Negative: 25%

Neutral or mixed: 2%

Positive: 6%

Not applicable: 2%

(Median response: 'Very negative')

Mental health impact on the non-UK partner in the relationship:

Terrible (likely lifelong impact): 32%

Very negative: 30%

Negative: 28%

Neutral or mixed: 8%

Positive: 2%

Not applicable: 0%

(Median response: 'Very negative')

Mental health impact on the child(ren) in the relationship:

Terrible (likely lifelong impact): 10%

Very negative: 8%

Negative: 8%

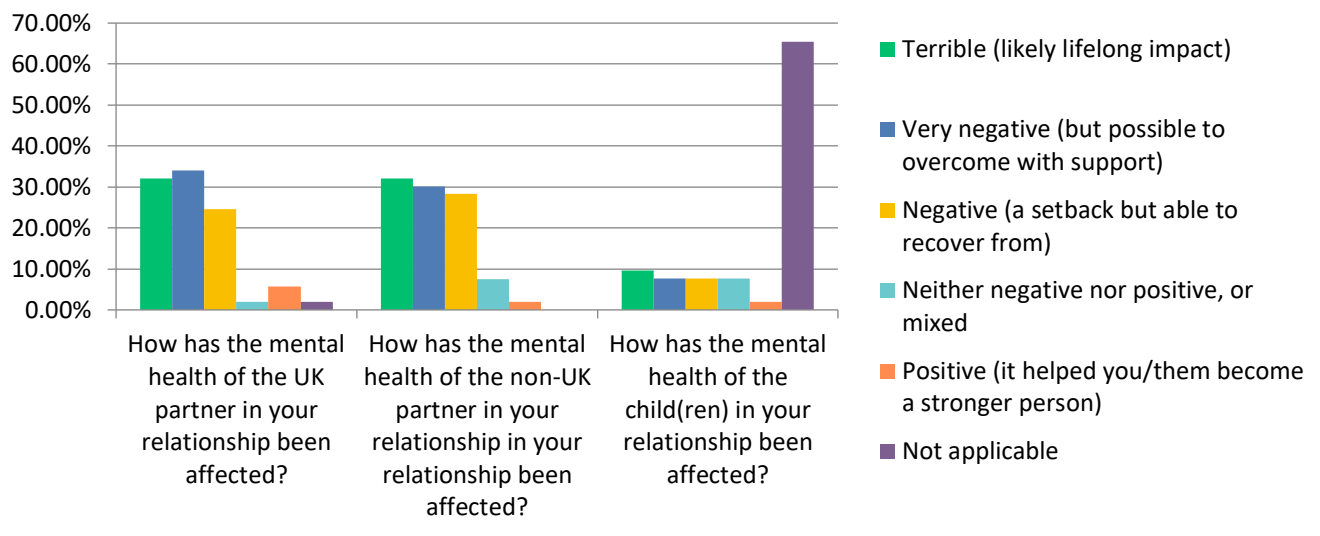
Neutral or mixed: 8%

Positive: 2%

Not applicable: 65%

(Median response for those with children: 'Negative', but with responses spread across the spectrum).

Please rate the impact of this separation on the mental health of your family:



1j/ Please rate the impact of this separation on the primary relationships in your life

The relationship questions were also marked on a 5-point scale as follows:

Permanently and irreparably damaged

Severely tested but not damaged beyond repair

Tested but we have overcome this

Neither negative nor positive, or mixed

Strengthened

The results are tabulated below.

Relationship with your partner:

Permanently and irreparably damaged: 4%

Severely tested but not damaged beyond repair: 42%

Tested but we have overcome this: 34%

Neutral or mixed: 2%

Strengthened: 19%

Not applicable: 0%

(Median response: between 'Severely tested' and 'Tested', with a fortunate few saying 'Strengthened').

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 email: hello@reunitefamiliesuk.co.uk

Relationship with your child(ren), if applicable:

Permanently and irreparably damaged: 4%

Severely tested but not damaged beyond repair: 21%

Tested but we have overcome this: 8%

Neutral or mixed: 2%

Strengthened: 2%

Not applicable: 64%

(Median response where applicable: 'Severely tested'. This very negative impact on relationships with children is a worrying aspect to these results and reflects the findings of the Children's Commissioner 2015 report: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2015/09/09/skype-families/>).

Relationship with other family members (e.g. parents, grandparents):

Permanently and irreparably damaged: 15%

Severely tested but not damaged beyond repair: 31%

Tested but we have overcome this: 31%

Neutral or mixed: 12%

Strengthened: 2%

Not applicable: 10%

(Median response where applicable: between 'Severely tested' and 'Tested'. This reflects a self-reported lack of understanding among close families members as reported in the 'Kept Apart' project: <https://www.reunitefamiliesuk.co.uk/kept-apart-project> . It is also interesting to view this aspect of the findings in light of Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants' and BritCits' 2014 report on the impact of the Immigration Rules on extended family members, such as adult dependent relatives: <https://jcw.org.uk/sites/default/files/adr%20report%202014.pdf>)

Relationship with close friend(s):

Permanently and irreparably damaged: 12%

Severely tested but not damaged beyond repair: 17%

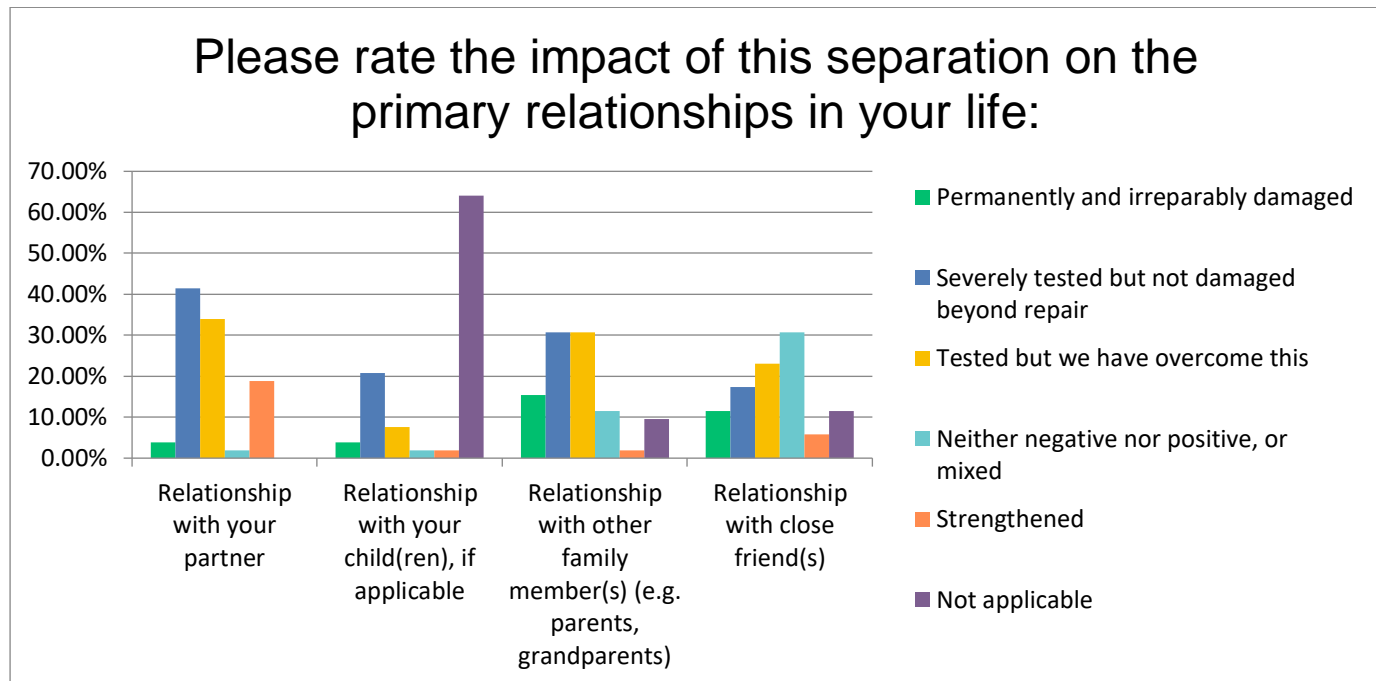
Tested but we have overcome this: 23%

Neutral or mixed: 31%

Strengthened: 6%

Not applicable: 12%

(Median response where applicable: 'Tested', although responses are across the spectrum with the largest group reporting a 'Neutral or mixed' impact. That said the testing of relationships once again reflects the Kept Apart Project's finding of a lack of understanding among close friends or family).



1k/ Please rate the impact of this separation on your career and finances

Given the documented costs of the process and attention to detail needed, here the respondents were asked to assess the impact on their career and financial health. Once again, a 5-point scale was used:

Terrible (e.g. destitution/bankruptcy): 9%

Very negative (long term financial/career damage e.g. forced onto benefits): 42%

Negative (e.g. high expenses/work performance issues): 43%

Neutral, or mixed: 6%

Positive (e.g. new career opportunities/self-growth): 0%

(Median response: between 'Very negative' and 'Negative', indicating long term career damage for many and indeed many being forced onto benefits.

It is interesting to read these results in light of the government's assertions that the MIR protects the economy and meets its economic goals by protecting the benefits system. The findings of this survey indicate this is far from the case, both by forcing people onto benefits – for example through single parenthood – and damaging their long-term careers, therefore damaging the prospects of both individuals and the economy as a whole.

This appears to support the findings of Middlesex University's 2013 briefing on the likely fiscal impact of the MIR, which can be read here: <http://sprc.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/MRN-Mdx-briefing.pdf> - namely, that the MIR would likely be harmful to the economy).

Technology and Online Relationships

The remaining questions for this survey focused on the impact of technology on relationships.

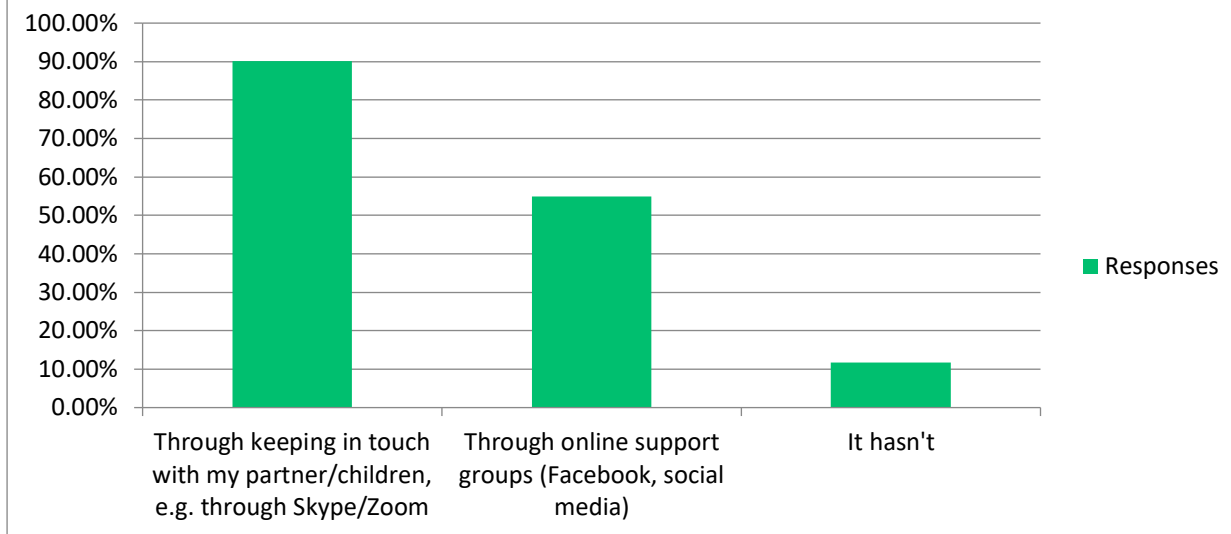
1l/ How has technology/the Internet helped you through the separation?

90% of our respondents reported that technology helped to keep in touch with their partner or children, for example through Skype.

55% reported that technology helped them through online support groups, for example on Facebook.

A small minority reported that technology had not helped them at all.

How has online technology/the Internet helped you through the separation?



1m/ It has previously been argued that important family relationships can be conducted largely online. Given your experience of family separation, how do you feel about that statement?

Once again, the respondents were asked to rank this on a 5-point scale. The response was overwhelming:

That's completely ridiculous: 89%

Largely false: 8%

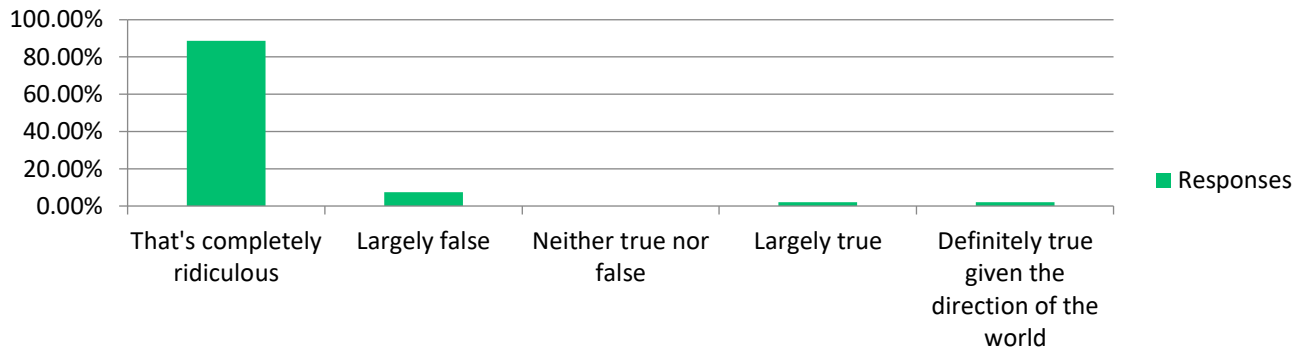
Neither true nor false: 0%

Largely true: 2%

Definitely true given the direction of the world: 2%

Arguments which have been presented that 'online' relationships are a subject for 'real life' relationships', for example in the courts when debating the Minimum Income Requirement, are therefore decisively rejected by our sample who have indeed experienced Covid-type separation.

It's previously been argued (e.g. in the courts) that important family relationships can be conducted largely online. Given your experience of family separation, how do you feel about that statement?



Taking the answers to 1l/ and 1m/ together, the broad consensus is that while technology can enhance relationships (through enabling people to keep in touch with close family members, and as a source of broader support from others, they are definitively not a replacement for 'real life' relationships.

Study 1: Living Online – Individual Responses

Here we will briefly look at some of the individual responses to the 'Living Online' survey.

The responses speak for themselves and in many cases eloquently express the stress and desperation of family separation.

From the comments section on the questions on physical and mental health:

'My husband is on anti-depressants. His mental health often leads him to suicidal thoughts.'

'This also affected my elderly mother and father. My mother has health problems and I was constantly worried that the stress would affect her further. There was no rest from it, it was like living in a nightmare.'

'With my husband not here during lockdown meant we were able to see my mum (kid's nana) as a support for childcare which would not have been allowed if he'd been here.'

'I suffered a heart attack which has left me with lifelong heart problems. I've also lost my driving licence because of it. I had my own company as a HGV driver, so it's been devastating for us regarding the Minimum Income Requirement and ability to reapply for a spouse visa. I can't prove it, but I'm convinced that the stress and worry of visa refusals, being apart as a family, working long hours and 6-day weeks to meet the MIR, was a big cause of my heart attack.'

'Both adults have experienced mental health trauma and a physical manifestation of severe stress and anxiety due to this situation. Our daughter has also suffered due to these circumstances.'

'As the spouse I try and remain positive and throw myself into my work but have had dark thoughts, depression and personality and character changes. For my wife she has been in very dark places, depression, anxiety and character and personality changes. The question of should we divorce has been raised before. Only happy when I visit and we are together.'

'All I can say is that the immigration rules cause stress and break up people who truly love each other. As citizens of the UK we should have the right to be with whoever we want to no matter their nationality, without paying ridiculous visa fees. For low income people this is completely unfair and causes health problems from stress. Also causes feelings of not being good enough as I don't earn enough money to bring my partner here. The system is just flawed and the working class pay. :('

'The waiting has caused anxiety for both persons. Having such a long period separated can put strain on the relationship which can be overcome but is avoidable. Anxiety of factors such as having to battle to get approved flight so your partner can travel once visa is received '

'We can't say anything rather than big stress. I don't think HO ever have this hurt feeling when they can't hug or even meet someone they loved.'

'My British husband is sick after a stroke he had and this situation affected him badly too, my British children also are suffering and missing their daddy.'

'My 11-year-old is in need of counselling support, which because of the pandemic and lockdown, has been unable to receive any help at all. We have wound up with a broken family and each parent in their own, in near homelessness and destitution.'

'UK husband has redeveloped type 2 diabetes as he has not had the time or motivation to prepare proper meals, wife did that. He has not slept properly since his wife left, chronic insomnia. Headaches and migraines from stress. Non-UK spouse. Miscarried on the plane on the flight back to Australia. Gained 10 kilos from not exercising and excessive overeating unhealthily due to depression which then lead to gallbladder attacks. Sleep problems due to video chatting and time zones and insomnia. Severe panic attacks which lead to being medicated. '

'The separation has caused PTSD in both cases which has had physical effects on both of us including hair loss and panic attacks.'

'Separated due to not meeting the crazy income requirements when low paid jobs will never meet this this has caused lots of anxiety and upset as well as stress.'

'Hardships faced on UK spouse living overseas, often depressed, developed anxiety, often vomiting from stress, no mental health services in husband's country to support UK spouse. Missing family back in UK, not yet visited them in the past two years because of visit visa restrictions.'

'I am the sponsor and suffer with PTSD, depression, and extreme anxiety because of being separated. I have been on medication for 3 years and have had various talking therapies which have not eased the situation. My husband has symptoms of PTSD but refuses to be seen by a specialist because of the stigma of mental health in men and cultural differences.'

Respondents were also asked to assess the future of their relationship. Responses are below:

'Negative.'

'I hope we can continue to love and care for each other. But sometimes I worry that mental health issues may be too much to carry.'

'Positive. Love him dearly and could not be without him. Saving for ILR has been a struggle. Both feeling the pressure.'

'I will appreciate him so much when he finally gets here (if his application is successful) but I'm concerned that the anxiety I've experienced from this separation could have a negative impact. It has also made things like jobs, housing and finances more difficult which could cause relationship problems.'

'I feel positive that eventually my husband and I will be together but I am concerned about the long-term impact this separation has had on our relationship.'

'Our relationship will keep going strong, but whether we will be affected by the harsh immigration rules again I just don't know and it is our fear.'

'We've reapplied one last time. If refused, the relationship after 9 years, will be over.'

'About to apply so hopefully successful and able to be together very soon.'

'Positive - absence makes the heart grow fonder.'

'We have a very strong relationship, but the anxiety and stress of being apart will likely never leave me (the UK partner) until my husband (non -UK) is approved his British citizenship. His application for LTR was submitted in the first week of April 2020, and because of COVID-19, we are still waiting, so that's hanging over our heads a little, even if there is no legitimate reason we should be worried. The financial strain is something that we really could do without. It has damaged my finances and credit score rather a lot. However, I wouldn't be without him so it's just something we have to accept and keep plugging away at. Hope to be debt free in 2025-ish.'

'With support there is a positive outcome.'

'Our feelings and love for each other are very strong, but as for us having a life living together, I feel very negative about it.'

'Would very much take the pressure off if the U.K. government lifted the minimum income requirements and high visa fees.'

'Negative, we both will need some time to recover, to function normally as a family. A lot of plans already wasted. Especially because this is our first year of marriage, our honeymoon period is filled with misery.'

'Positive, we have tried to stay strong but it's very difficult with all the paperwork and uncertainty.'

'I am hopeful that we will be reunited and be able to put this experience behind us, however there appears to be no consideration for the irreparable damage inflicted on parents and children by the current home office conduct. I think we will honestly need couples therapy to overcome some of this damage. In spite of this, we both try to remain positive.'

'Just don't know, but we're not beaten yet.'

'Positive, we will be together eventually.'

'I hope positive. We hope to get through all the challenges of immigration.'

'Hoping and praying that we will be reunited by the end of 2020 after being apart for 9 months.'

'If things continue this way for many more years, we will have to leave the UK permanently in order to be together. This is very negative. Our relationship will be under constant strain and we will be far from our family and support network. Our lives will be harder. Our relationship will hopefully continue.'

'It depends on the day. Some days I am very confident of the future of my marriage, other days I ask myself if my husband will overcome all this stressful, distance, wasting of money, tiers, our dreams'

on standby... its mentally and emotional challenging. Our mental health is so fragile, I feel so sad sometimes and alone and I'm sure my husband feels the same.'

'We are trying to bring my wife over so if successful then we will have a positive outlook, if rejected, the costs of trying will severely affect our mental health and our finances.'

'Not. Sure.'

'I am still hopeful that I will be able to live with my partner in the UK (as is my right).'

'Positive because being together is better than not being together.'

'Positive. Are applying now for UK fiancé visa which we feel hopeful about but will take years to pay back the cost as need to take a debt. The UK visa fees are extortionate.'

'Negatives in the UK you need to pay the government if you love someone from outside the UK.'

'Positive, because we really want to build our family together.'

'We are supporting each other but we need to be together, for my husband's sake and my children's life.'

'I only see hope in having the right to work and provide for my two British children.'

'Delayed. Everything has been pushed backwards. Plans of starting a family could be held back due to emotional trauma and delays in seeking treatment from UK with miscarriages. Will have to rebuild and open up due to shutting down and putting up walls to protect myself and survive being separated. Husband and I have been through more than most will experience in a lifetime and we still madly love each other after being together for 6 years but only living with each other for 2, we have been inseparable for the 6 years (we video chat for 4-12 hours a day) being separated has been like losing a part of ourselves. We appreciate the little things. My husband is more loving and sensitive and supportive. We will overcome eventually but it's been a lot of pain and it should be time spent happily not spent overcoming the previous year of torture from being separated.'

'Damaged from anxiety, depression, financial strain, future worries over having to begin Visa and fees all over again.'

'It took at least a year to get back to "normal " but with the help from our family once we were all together, we all pulled together and eventually got back to where we were not scared to be apart.'

'If we are separated any longer my husband (UK citizen) will be forced to leave his country and we will live in some country not native to either of us, far from friends and family, so we can make a living. We may never get a chance to start a family as we have to adopt. This will devastate us both. His health will be at risk as he depends on hormone treatment. This will make us choose between his physical health and our family. I am exhausted, frustrated and desperately sad from online meetings and constant goodbyes. I need this to be over, and us together.'

'Very positive. If we can overcome this, we'll get through anything.'

'Hopefully it won't break us up.'

'Positive. I found the man I was always looking for, the person I will spend the rest of my life with. He's my best friend and someone I can build a future with. '

'I don't see us being separated by dreadful immigration law changing I don't meet the income requirements and never will as a low-income worker I'm being penalised for falling in love with someone and my life together and our marriage can't start while we are separated this adds lots of anxiety and stress. '

'Negative for a while. But I hope we will overcome.'

'It's unclear at the moment as a recent refusal is still weighing in on us and we are struggling to find hope. So, we don't know how we can maintain our relationship with all the stress.'

'If I can get the visa it will be positive.'

'Positive, but in time. 12 months separation will have an effect on us.'

'Together, in his country. '

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'I don't know, currently positive every relationship has its faults. '

'Negative. We are in the process of a separation and I am not sure it can be reconciled. '

Respondents were also asked to comment on the impact of technology on their online relationship:

'When a child's location in the UK (address) is being kept secret from you, for four years, it is basically as keeping a child away from their non-EU parent. It could only be described as kidnapping, when the grandparents control when, if and for how long you get to see and speak to your child. Technology does not help at all in certain inhumane scenarios.'

'Online is nothing like being together in person, it can't even come close. The time zones for one is huge let alone the emotional and physical impact it has. Being apart from each other has been torturous. I come from a Commonwealth country, I am wanting to be in the UK for love not to move there for a better life, Australia is absolutely incredible and I would not leave under any circumstances except for love and a life with my soul mate, it's frustrating there isn't something for commonwealth countries, we are technically still under the queen herself yet fighting to enter like I come from a third world. '

'Families need a physical touch, a hug a presence. Technology fails all too often, different time zones and work commitments, falling asleep from working double shifts while waking for matching off work time. Covid restrictions are a perfect example of how detrimental to health being unable to even place a hand into your loved one's hand can be.'

'Staying in touch online has been a crutch, a necessary evil that we hold onto, like onto a straw while drowning. It certainly does not allow actual relationship to develop and bloom. We need physical contact, and denying us family life due to how laws and borders are interpreted between countries - is nothing short of outrageous. '

'How can my children hug their dad online. They don't like having to give all their days info in a phone conversation at a set time.'

'As previously stated not everyone is lucky to have good Internet some areas terrible mobile signal as no landlines not everyone lives in cities.'

'How can I start a family and have a physical relationship via technology? Even a simple hug or to take care of one another. It's impossible!!! Now I'm out of the U.K. and my friends and family miss me so much they understand how hard it is, it's not the same! '

'I don't want to live a life where there is a price on love and UK citizens struggle so much to bring their partners to their country. It's insane.'

'Separation from family is cruel and unnecessary, we are not criminals that need to be punished with exile. We only want to be settled down in a place we can feel home and safe with people we love.'

'We have lost so much time... Some days we feel like strangers to each other.'

'My son is 2 years old. He doesn't want to interact with his dad on a video call.'

'I feel deprived of a basic right to be with my family when I can.'

'Like i said, if we had to endure any more time speaking online, we would have broken up. I cannot fathom trying to continue a normal life whilst being forced to continue a relationship through a screen, especially with no routine or intimacy.'

'We tried it for almost 2 years and it can't be. '

Study 2: Coronavirus Impact – Summary Responses

This survey concerned itself specifically with families who had applied for a visa during the Covid-19 pandemic.

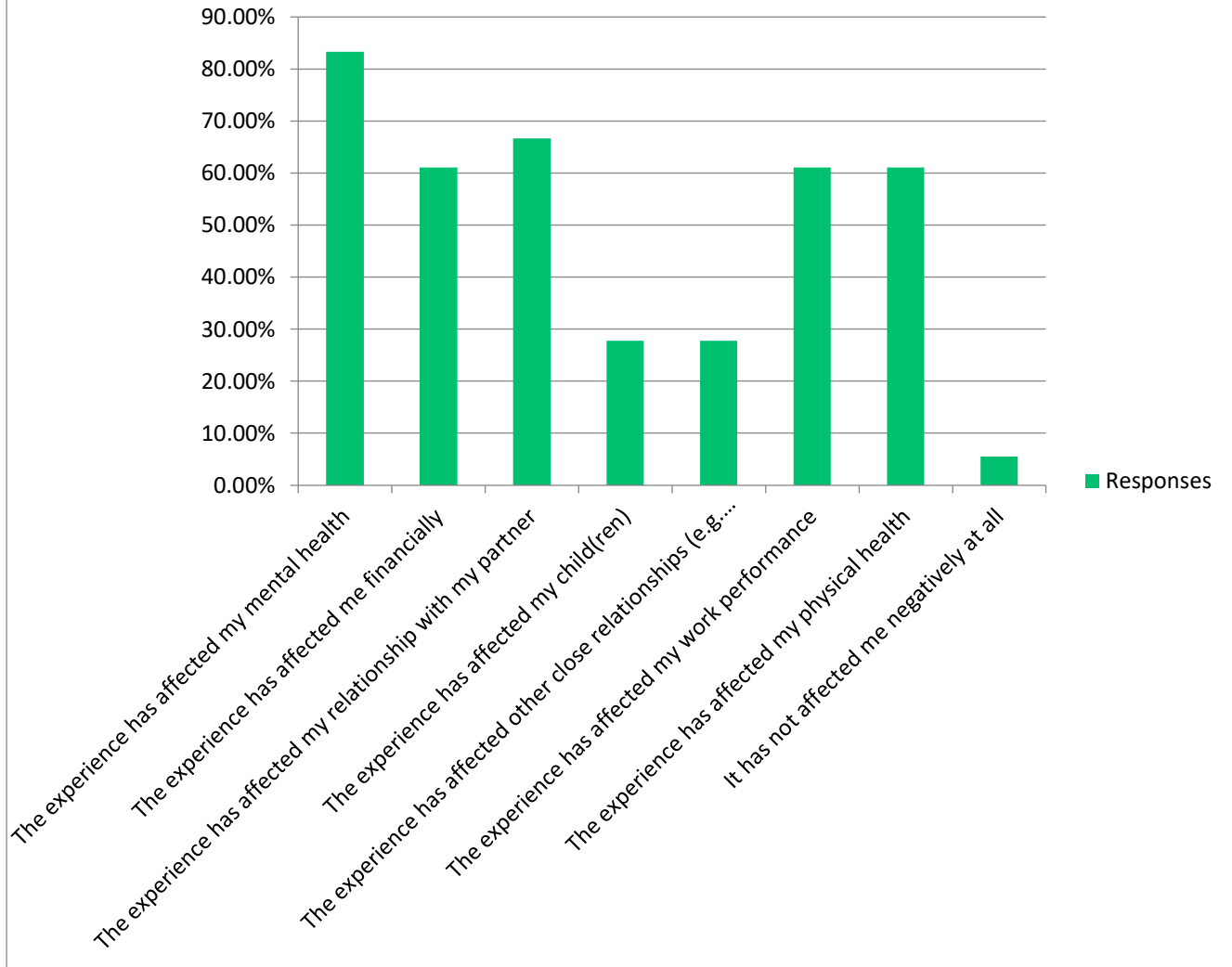
By 14th November 2020, the survey had elicited 18 responses, producing a representative range of different experiences, summarised below. This group of people were self-selected and sampled separately from those sampled in the 'Living Online' survey above.

2a/ Has Covid19 affected your personal experience of the visa or immigration system?

Here those with direct experience of the spousal visa immigration system during the pandemic were asked to assess the impact of the process on aspects of their lives, with multiple answers allowed. The results are tabulated below:

'The experience has affected my mental health'	83%
'The experience has affected me financially'	61%
'The experience has affected my relationship with my partner'	67%
'The experience has affected my child(ren)'	28%
'The experience has affected my other close relationships' (e.g. grandparents and grandchildren, close friends etc)	28%
'The experience has affected my work performance'	61%
'The experience has affected my physical health'	61%
'It has not affected me negatively at all'	6%

Has Covid19 affected your personal experience of the visa or immigration system? (choose as many as apply)



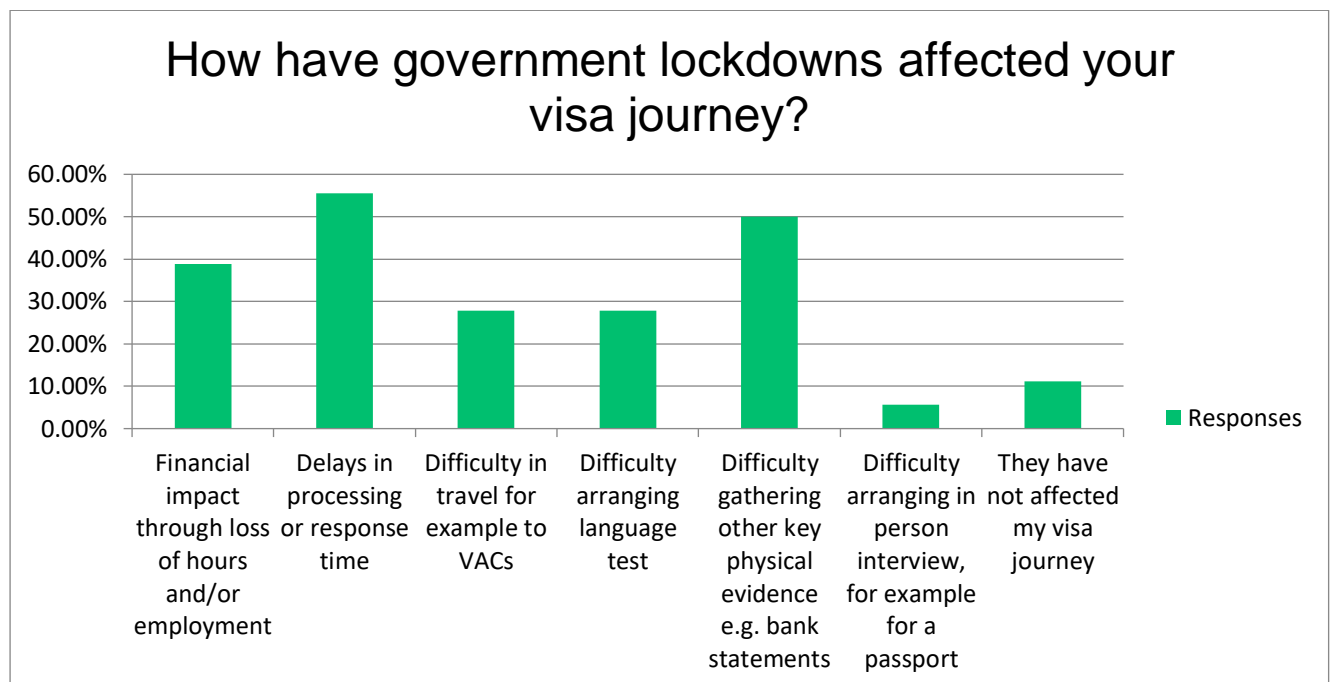
As with the 'Study 1: Living Online' survey, it can be seen that the impact of the process on the mental health of those going through it is dramatic. There is also an impact on the physical and financial health and relationships of these people, as well as work performance.

Once again, the health impact of the immigration process on British families can be seen to be almost entirely negative, with a negative economic impact also implied (for example, when assessing the work performance of these individuals).

2b/ How have government lockdowns affected your visa journey

Here those with experience of the spousal visa immigration system were asked to assess how the pandemic-related lockdowns affected different aspects of their visa process. Results are tabulated below:

'Financial impact through loss of hours and/or employment'	39%
'Delays in processing or response time'	56%
'Difficulty in travel for example to VACs'	28%
'Difficulty arranging language test'	28%
'Difficulty gathering other key physical evidence'	50%
'Difficult arranging in person interview, e.g. for a passport'	6%
'They have not affected my visa journey'	11%



It can be seen that the lockdowns have had an almost exclusively negative impact on people's experience of the visa system. 50% or more of respondents in particular reported perceived delays in processing or response time as well as gathering physical evidence as being areas of particular concern.

The Home Office's own figures (accessible via <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/managed-migration-datasets#entry-clearance-visas-granted-outside-the-uk> , tab Data – Vis_D02) show a dramatic drop off in visa processing during the most intense months of the pandemic. If we filter the processing results for family (partner) visas for 5 nations for the 4 quarters leading up to the pandemic, a dramatic picture emerges:

2019	2019 Q3	Indonesia	Family: Partner	Issued	59
2019	2019 Q3	Indonesia	Family: Partner	Refused	11
2019	2019 Q3	Indonesia	Family: Partner	Withdrawn	1
2019	2019 Q4	Indonesia	Family: Partner	Issued	57
2019	2019 Q4	Indonesia	Family: Partner	Refused	3
2020	2020 Q1	Indonesia	Family: Partner	Issued	34
2020	2020 Q1	Indonesia	Family: Partner	Refused	6
2020	2020 Q2	Indonesia	Family: Partner	Issued	3
2020	2020 Q2	Indonesia	Family: Partner	Refused	1

2019	2019 Q3	Turkey	Family: Partner	Issued	232
2019	2019 Q3	Turkey	Family: Partner	Refused	35
2019	2019 Q3	Turkey	Family: Partner	Withdrawn	2
2019	2019 Q4	Turkey	Family: Partner	Issued	274
2019	2019 Q4	Turkey	Family: Partner	Refused	27
2020	2020 Q1	Turkey	Family: Partner	Issued	207
2020	2020 Q1	Turkey	Family: Partner	Refused	11
2020	2020 Q1	Turkey	Family: Partner	Withdrawn	2
2020	2020 Q2	Turkey	Family: Partner	Issued	49
2020	2020 Q2	Turkey	Family: Partner	Withdrawn	1

2019	2019 Q3	USA	Family: Partner	Issued	672
2019	2019 Q3	USA	Family: Partner	Refused	78
2019	2019 Q3	USA	Family: Partner	Withdrawn	6
2019	2019 Q4	USA	Family: Partner	Issued	730
2019	2019 Q4	USA	Family: Partner	Refused	60
2019	2019 Q4	USA	Family: Partner	Withdrawn	3
2020	2020 Q1	USA	Family: Partner	Issued	602
2020	2020 Q1	USA	Family: Partner	Refused	32
2020	2020 Q1	USA	Family: Partner	Withdrawn	3
2020	2020 Q2	USA	Family: Partner	Issued	13

2019	2019 Q3	Japan	Family: Partner	Issued	76
2019	2019 Q3	Japan	Family: Partner	Refused	10
2019	2019 Q3	Japan	Family: Partner	Withdrawn	1
2019	2019 Q4	Japan	Family: Partner	Issued	68
2019	2019 Q4	Japan	Family: Partner	Refused	4
2019	2019 Q4	Japan	Family: Partner	Withdrawn	1
2020	2020 Q1	Japan	Family: Partner	Issued	61
2020	2020 Q1	Japan	Family: Partner	Refused	5
2020	2020 Q2	Japan	Family: Partner	Issued	9
2020	2020 Q2	Japan	Family: Partner	Refused	1

2019	2019 Q3	Nigeria	Family: Partner	Issued	358
2019	2019 Q3	Nigeria	Family: Partner	Refused	74
2019	2019 Q3	Nigeria	Family: Partner	Withdrawn	2
2019	2019 Q4	Nigeria	Family: Partner	Issued	381
2019	2019 Q4	Nigeria	Family: Partner	Refused	97
2019	2019 Q4	Nigeria	Family: Partner	Withdrawn	1
2020	2020 Q1	Nigeria	Family: Partner	Issued	392
2020	2020 Q1	Nigeria	Family: Partner	Refused	65
2020	2020 Q2	Nigeria	Family: Partner	Issued	8
2020	2020 Q2	Nigeria	Family: Partner	Refused	1

The drop-off is clear, and needs little explanation. Between Q1 and Q2 2020, according to the Home Office's own figures, Indonesia saw a 90% drop in processing partner(visa) applications, Turkey saw a 77% drop in processing these applications, Japan saw an 85% drop. During the same period, the USA and Nigeria saw incredible drops of 97% and 98% in processing partner visas, respectively.

These five nations are representative (we chose Indonesia, Turkey and the USA as the three most common nations among our sample and added Japan and Nigeria to enhance the geographical and cultural range) – but we see similar proportional drops for all nations during the pandemic via the Home Office's own datasets. It is not unreasonable to attribute these to additional Home Office delays, which were also self-reported on the online groups polled for respondents.

We also see a large proportion of people reporting issues with gathering physical evidence. For example, the Family Migration rules for financial evidence (accessible here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/934644/appendix-fm-1-7-financial-requirement-v4.0-gov-uk.pdf) require that *'Bank statements must be on official bank stationery. Alternatively, electronic bank statements can also be accepted for all bank accounts (the account itself does not have to be exclusively online) as long as they are either accompanied by a letter from the bank on its headed stationery confirming that the documents are authentic or which bear the official stamp of the issuing bank on every page.'*

This is, to say the least, not an easy request for fulfil during a global pandemic and lockdown.

Other respondents reported difficulty with for example getting evidence for language tests, with local VACs in some cases giving conflicting and contradictory advice as to whether such tests were required during the pandemic, or as reported by the Home Office Minister (see: <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2020-10-07.100424.h>) that exemptions were in place. Via a Freedom of Information request (see: https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/question_about_exemptions_to_lan) we have as yet been unable to ascertain exactly which exemptions were in place for which countries.

All of the above builds a picture of a somewhat confused response which added to delays to individuals and consequent impacts on their lives and health.

2c/ How would you rank your experience of the immigration system during Covid19?

Respondents were asked to assess their experience of the system on a 5-point scale. Results are tabulated below:

Terrible:	44%
Poor:	17%
OK:	33%
Good:	0%
Great:	0%

Not a single respondent reported an experience better than 'OK', with the largest group of respondents going for the most negative assessment. This should not come as a surprise given the documented delays as above, as well as the impact of the system upon people's lives and health. Clearly there are lessons to be learned here.

Study 2: Coronavirus Impact – Individual Responses

As well as looking at quantitative responses, during the survey we asked our respondents to describe their experienced individually via a series of questions. A selection is below.

Respondents were asked to describe how Covid-19 and associated lockdowns affected their visa journey

'Application was delayed 4months as IELTS was unavailable. Also wanted to use priority option but no longer available.'

'My application was delayed until August because TLS centre in Serbia opened in July and is working only 2 days a week.'

Respondents were asked to comment on how their experience of the process impacted their health

'The ongoing stress & lack of a 2nd income & my income being cut due to less hours are affecting me physically and emotionally.'

'My son (18) told me that he would look after his sister (12) if my visa is denied.'

'I have suffered from severe anxiety and more recently depression. This is a result of a lack of support this past year whilst I undertook teacher training as a single parent due to immigration rules prevent our family from being reunited.'

'If we don't sort this visa we will have to separate because our mental health is very bad. We can't Skype anymore it's not a life.'

'My husband has NRPF and was one of the many who were not entitled to self-employment scheme, meaning when lockdown happened, he had no income and had to rely on mine.'

Finally, respondents were asked to for any additional comments on the system

'I am near destitute and depend on the visa being approved, to have the right to work and provide for my two British children.'

'It is a miserable, degrading, anxiety inducing system. My fiancé is a doctor with the NHS and I did my Master's degree in Law in Scotland and it has been very difficult for us.'

'Disgusting regardless of pandemic or not.'

'Don't think the Government quite realizes the huge emotional toll this visa process takes on applicants at the best of times let alone during COVID-19. I am a British citizen and I am about ready to give up on living in the UK so that I can be with my partner. I've had a comparatively easy situation to many others as I meet the MIR and no kids involved so I can only imagine the suffering and despair of others.'

'We paid the extortion visa fee on the day of application in advance. No response, no service from HO for such an expensive product (visa, almost £ 3000).'

'As I mentioned earlier, we were coming to the end of a year long journey after applying for an EEA family permit in March 2019. After our refusal in August, we immediately applied for an appeal and due to the complex nature of our case, this was granted and it was agreed it must be heard in person. We have now been stuck since March with no rescheduling of our hearing so are enduring further waiting which results in hardship for myself, my partner and our daughter.'

'Can't complete requirements to apply. Offices are closed down. '

'I've emailed them to allow me to attend funeral of my husband's half-sister and they never responded to me. Funeral has passed. 😞'

'I just hoped they were more accommodating to vulnerable people who needed to be together through this hard time.'

'We managed to get our further leave to remain in JUST before lockdown and were very nervous about what would happen. We did however get a positive response in about a month I think it was.'

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is clear from both surveys that the impact of both 'living online' and the delays caused by lockdowns on the health of British citizens and their families is both dramatic and negative. This should be a 'lesson learned' both from COVID-19 and for the immigration system in general.

The result of this study clearly show that 'living online' is absolutely no substitute for physical in person presence, at least as far as familial relationships are concerned. However, technology can be a useful tool as a means of keeping in touch and to build a support network for those impacted. It is not, however, a replacement.

We would like to make the following recommendations:

i/ Consideration for health and wellbeing – both adults and children.

The spousal visa process should be streamlined both because of lengthy delays and the well-documented impact on the mental and physical health of those going through the system.

The impacts on health were already hinted at in the APPG Migration's 2013 report and the Children's Commissioner's 2015 report, as well as online blogs documenting the stories and visa journeys of those impacted (for example, 'Love Letters to the Home Office', the BritCits blog, and the Family Immigration Alliance, all of which are referenced in the bibliography). This was further supported by Reunite Families UK's and Bristol University's 2020 'Kept Apart' e-book and project. A more detailed study is needed here.

Consideration should be given for specialist support for those going through the process, given the extreme trauma and stress created by the visa process, on both adults and children.

In particular, it is too early to truly assess the long-term psychological impact on children. Whilst the study reports that if anything children in these situations may show greater resilience than adults, long-term hidden damage may be present and should be the subject of long-term specialist tracking and investigation.

ii/ Economic considerations/move to customer-focused model.

These surveys suggest that the economic impact is largely negative (supporting Middlesex University's 2013 findings), with family separation adding a stress factor to people's lives (affecting work performance and in some cases extreme visa costs leading to practical destitution) and also forcing British people into single parenthood and onto benefits. A more detailed study of the economic impact of the MIR is needed here.

Visa costs have spiralled since 2012. These high costs (of around £9000 or more currently for the 5-year spouse visa process, higher for the 10-year and fiancé visa processes) should come with a premium service to match. That nearly half our respondents marked their experience with the Home Office as 'terrible' shows that considerable work needs to be done on customer care here.

iii/ Streamlining and physical evidence/move to online evidence.

Lengthy delays – with an average family separation time ranging from 3 months to 3 years - have an impact on people’s health, with distress reported as key life events (such as family weddings or funerals, or the opportunity for respondents to start families of their own) are missed whilst ‘in limbo’, and we recommend that ways are investigated to streamline the process further.

In particular, people reported delays due to the need to gather physical evidence (such as bank statements, on paper or stamped – a service many bank branches no longer provide). The evidential requirements should move to match with the online world and indeed banks’ own working practices.

Contradictory and conflicting advice also appears to have been given in some cases for example with language tests. This should be looked at as a way of streamlining the process further. We would in particular call for more flexibility around these evidentiary requirements.

iv/ COVID-19 flexibility and public health/lifting NRPF and MIR.

The pandemic has created a public health crisis unprecedented in living memory.

It is our assertion that the No Recourse to Public Funds requirement has in fact contributed to the risks of this public crisis through pushing those already financially stressed to the brink of destitution. NRPF should therefore be at least temporarily lifted.

We also believe that, due to the very special nature of this crisis, due consideration should be given to at least temporarily lifting the Minimum Income Requirement, for numerous reasons including:

- the now-documented impact of the MIR rules, from multiple sources, on the health of affected families and their relationships across generations;
- to lift the negative economic impacts of the MIR, required during an economically fragile period;
- to somewhat compensate for the documented response and performance issues during the pandemic;
- and above all the need for a more compassionate Home Office.

Given the nature of the crisis, we would also like to request further consideration for allowing visitors to switch to spousal visas in country. We also welcome the earnings flexibility (the ‘COVID-19 exemption’ mentioned under ‘exceptional circumstances’ on page 69 of the Home Office financial guidelines

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/934644/appendix-fm-1-7-financial-requirement-v4.0-gov-uk.pdf) shown by the Home Office so far.

v/ Greater visitor flexibility.

Some of our respondents self-reported on the difficulty of obtaining visitor visas for certain nationalities with a perception that such visas are extremely difficult to obtain.

For those whose partners are overseas and who are trying to establish a relationship with them, we would like to request greater flexibility of the visitor rules for visa nationals. This would allow the couple the ability to determine the future of their relationship (rather than conducting these first steps largely online) and avoid a situation where couples and families are effectively 'set up to fail'.

vi/ The compassionate Home Office.

The Home Secretary recently called for a more compassionate Home Office and associated culture shift. This year, the Public Accounts Committee itself reported that 'the Home Office has no idea of the impact of immigration policies' (<https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/127/public-accounts-committee/news/119248/home-office-has-no-idea-of-the-impact-of-immigration-policies/>).

A cultural shift is needed here, with public service providers such as the Home Office being made accountable for the impact of its decisions on real human beings (including British citizens and taxpayers, and their families) and being made to appreciate that a premium service is being paid for and should be provided.

Our families are trying to do the right thing here, and coupled with the high psychological and financial costs of the process, we believe they should be treated with compassion and sympathy.

Further Reading/Bibliography

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Migration – Family Migration Inquiry 2013:

<https://appgmigration.org.uk/family-migration-inquiry-2013/>

The fiscal implications of the new Family Migration Rules – What does the evidence tell us? (Middlesex University, 2013): <http://sprc.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/MRN-Mdx-briefing.pdf>

Report on the Impact of Adult Dependent Relative Rules on Families and Children (JCWI/BritCits), 2014:

<https://jcw.org.uk/sites/default/files/adr%20report%202014.pdf>

‘Love Letters to the Home Office’, collection of stories of divided families, 2014:

<http://lovelettershome.org/stories/>

‘Skype Families’ – Report of the Children’s Commissioner for England 2015:

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2015/09/09/skype-families/>

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/skype-families/>

‘Kept Apart: couples and families separated by the UK immigration system’ (University of Bristol/Reunite Families UK), 2020: <https://www.reunitefamiliesuk.co.uk/kept-apart-project>

Home Office ‘has no idea’ of the impact of immigration policies (Public Accounts Committee), 2020:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/127/public-accounts-committee/news/119248/home-office-has-no-idea-of-the-impact-of-immigration-policies/>

Family Immigration Alliance blog (stories of divided families):

<https://familyimmigrationalliance.wordpress.com/>

BritCits blog (stories of divided families): <http://britcits.blogspot.com/search/label/stories>

Home Office entry clearance visas granted outside the UK, raw data 2005-2020:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/managed-migration-datasets#entry-clearance-visas-granted-outside-the-uk>

Family Migration: Appendix FM Section 1.7:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/934644/appendix-fm-1-7-financial-requirement-v4.0-gov-uk.pdf

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