

## Reforming the UK's family migration system

For more information, please visit [reunitefamiliesuk.co.uk](https://reunitefamiliesuk.co.uk) or email [hello@reunitefamiliesuk.co.uk](mailto:hello@reunitefamiliesuk.co.uk)

### What's the ask?

#### **To build a fairer and more humane family migration system in the UK.**

To begin, the Labour Party should oppose the increases recently introduced by the Government on the visa fees and Immigration Health Surcharge. Should the Government move forward with its plans to also increase the Minimum Income Requirement (MIR), the Party should oppose its increase and argue for it to be lowered and eventually scrapped as it would promote family values, reduce its gender discriminatory nature and avoid pushing families into further and unnecessary hardship.

### What do we mean by "family migration system"?

Family migration is the term used to categorize the migration of people who migrate due to new or established family ties: family accompanying a principal migrant; marriage between an immigrant and a citizen/settled resident; marriage between an immigrant and a foreigner living abroad; and international adoptions. RFUK focuses primarily on spouse visas

### Background

Over the course of the last decade in particular, the UK's family migration system has become increasingly restrictive. The stringent spouse visa rules including the Minimum Income Requirement (MIR) contributes to making the UK's family reunification rules amongst [the most restrictive around the world](#). This has been reflected by a recent House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee [report](#) which found that the **UK's family migration policies are failing both families, children and society as a whole**. The harshness of the system does not reflect the UK's current stance on migrants with recent evidence highlighting how the country has become [one of the world's most accepting places for foreign workers](#).

### What is the problem associated with the current rules?

The fundamental problem with the **current family migration rules is that they make family reunification very difficult if not impossible altogether**, especially if it is an adult dependent relative.

The severe financial requirements associated with it, the way in which they force women, very often British, to single-parent their child as they don't meet the requirement to sponsor their foreign-born partner, the regularly and ever-increasing costly renewal of the family visa needed to sponsor their partner to come and continue to live in the UK creates a perfect storm which continues to undermine the mental, physical, emotional and economic health of people who fall in love with somebody from abroad whilst in the process also harming the economy and society at large.

### Financial requirements:

#### Visa and Immigration Health Surcharge Fees Increase

From the 4<sup>th</sup> October, visa fees have been increased by a rate of between 15 and 35% with a draconian increase of 66% to the Immigration Health Surcharge coming later in the autumn.

For couples and individuals with skills that would benefit the UK, this is far from an attractive proposition. These raises will result in an increasingly expensive process which people will have to pay in order to settle here in the UK and live with their loved ones. For instance, **once the increases to the visa fees and IHS are taken into account the total amount for somebody on a 10-year route to settlement will go up by £5k to £18,371. An amount dwarfed by the £34,152 which will be needed to sponsor a partner and child on the 10-year route.**

Furthermore, the divisive technique used by the government has been the subject of strong opposition from migrant communities, frontline migrants' rights NGOs and some of the UK's [biggest labour unions](#), including the GMB and the British Medical Association which condemned the idea of funding a deserved (and needed) increase by further taxing migrants, by hiking visa costs and NHS fees. A blatant attempt to sow division within the labour movement by hiking the fees of many of the same workers who are the backbone of our public services.

#### Minimum Income Requirement

Alongside having to afford the visa fees, the sponsoring partner also has to meet a [minimum income requirement \(MIR\)](#). The MIR which was introduced in 2012, is the salary threshold UK citizens and settled residents applying to bring a partner or child to the country must meet to be able to do so.

Alongside the need for the UK sponsor to show either savings of £62,500, yearly earnings of £18,600 or a combination of the two, they also have to pay visa fees per each application and the immigration health surcharge (HIS) for every year of their partner's 5-or 10-year route to settlement.

It is important to note how money raised from the non-British spouse's payment of the Immigration Health Surcharge does not go to the NHS budget but goes to general government funds out of which funds get allocated to the health service.

Whilst the government rhetoric is to say that these rules protect the tax payer, the reality is that non-British spouses cannot, in fact, access any public or welfare benefits during their route to settlement and they are taxed twice for the health service – once on their applications and again through general taxation and National Insurance contributions (NICs) once in the UK.

### **Gender inequalities associated with the current rules**

According to a recent [briefing note](#) by the Migration Observatory at Oxford University, **as it currently stands, the MIR would not be met by 26% of working age employees**. However, if we add together people who do not work and those who work but earn less than £18,600, **they make up roughly 46% of the working-age population** (excluding the self-employed from the calculation entirely due to the dataset used).

Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly it is the **gender discrimination impact of the spouse visa rules**. In fact, according to a recent [briefing note](#) by the Migration Observatory at Oxford University, “the impacts of the threshold at its current level are likely to fall most heavily on part-time workers and people who do not work” with **the largest group being women (38%) who worked part time**.

### **Economic Impact**

If we look briefly at recent evidence, we can see that the UK has become [one of the world’s most accepting places for foreign workers](#), according to a survey in 24 nations which reveals a sharp increase in British acceptance of economic migration. However, despite the recent and widespread workforce shortages, the House of Lords Justice and Home Affairs Committee’s report evidenced how family migration policies and the MIR in particular, are acting as a brake on the recruitment of amongst others, medical professionals from abroad who highlighted to the Inquiry their doubts regarding whether to stay in the UK or reunite with their elderly parents abroad.

### **Government plans for the MIR and their possible impact**

Back in December, according to [The Times](#), the Home Secretary “[had] drawn up a blueprint for reducing immigration that would target foreign students, make it harder to bring spouses to the UK.” Whilst stringent limits to the family reunification rights of foreign students have been already implemented, it is still not clear when the government will move forward with its plans to also increase the Minimum Income Requirement.

According the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford, if the Minimum Income Requirement were to increase at the same rate of inflation from 2012 to 2022 of 2.4% (using the Bank of England Inflation Calculator and not including the high inflation from 2022-2023) we can see how **the new amount would be £23,565.40 in 2022**. This amount would significantly **increase the number of people (male and female) unable to meet the MIR with a third of males (28%) and half the female population (51%) in the UK being unable to earn enough to meet the MIR** if it was increase at this level. More worryingly still, were the changes to be implemented, **the majority of women would be unable to sponsor their partners** coming to the country and would have little option but to move abroad to be with their loved ones.

### **Mental Health Impact: the hidden cost of a failing migration policy**

These concurring factors unfortunately create the perfect environment to undermine and attack one’s mental health given the continue sense of uncertainty, the exorbitant costs associated with the visa process and the impact it has on closed family members including children. For this reason, Reunite Families UK, is **doing funded research into how it is affecting children and their families** – and the information coming through already is deeply troubling. Initial reports have flagged that **children are experiencing** extreme issues such as **selective mutism, stool holding, depression, anxiety, guilt**.

### **What change is needed?**

**For family values to be at the heart of any government this must also be reflected in their family migration policies and as such, rules should be reformed in order to prioritise the rights of British and settled residents to a fulfilling family life here in Britain.**

### **How should we achieve this?**

1. The first and most pressing issue to tackle should be the reduction of the financial burden associated with the family migration policies including the visa fees, the Immigration Health Surcharge as well as scrapping the Minimum Income Requirement.
2. As an initial measure towards a more humane and economically sound migration policy, a future Labour government should not increase and at a minimum cap the latest increases to the visa fees and Immigration Health Surcharge
3. Given the excellent work done by the Lords’ Justice and Home Affairs Committee, and the breadth of evidence used to formulate its key conclusions, the Labour Party should adopt and endorse the bi-partisans recommendations of - [All families matter: An inquiry into family migration](#).