Let Us Learn! Just for Kids Law – written evidence (CCE0141)

Let Us Learn is a group of over 850 young migrants, aged 16 to 24 years old, supported by the charity Just for Kids Law. All of us were brought to the UK as children, from over 70 different countries. We have grown up here and are proud to call Britain our home. Despite this and despite the fact that many of us cannot remember our country of birth, we are not legally recognised as citizens of the UK. Most of us have to go through a 10-year process of applying for and repeatedly renewing our immigration status, costing many thousands of pounds, before we are entitled to apply for British citizenship. Throughout the 10 years that this process takes, our continued status in the UK is precarious and expensive to maintain. Until we get to the point of being granted full citizenship, we live in fear that our temporary status (leave to remain) may be taken away from us.

Let Us Learn was launched in 2014, in response to a policy change which meant many of us were no longer eligible for student loans, and so could not take up hard won university places. Since then, our 'Young, Gifted and Blocked' campaign has had considerable success in winning increased student funding for migrants. See video here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BumdwKTbyZQ

Summary:
This paper is based on the responses of 20 members of our campaign leadership team. We also interviewed a selection of the 850 young migrants who have contacted us since we were formed in 2014 to canvass their opinions and personal experiences. A summary of the main points are as follows:

- There are many children and young people like us who have grown up in the UK, but who are not recognised as British citizens. It would benefit us and our communities, and improve social cohesion generally, if the process by which we obtain citizenship were less onerous and uncertain;
- Citizenship ceremonies are an insult to people like us who have lived here virtually all our lives, are steeped in British culture, and know no other home;
- Those without full citizenship should not be disadvantaged. We are already treated differently than our friends and peers who we have grown up with;
- Schools should have responsibility for teaching students about citizenship and immigration, so that children like us are informed of how our lives may be affected by government policy and can take steps to resolve our situations as early as possible;
- Our community does not feel “left behind” it feels forcibly held back by government policies and a Home Office, which charges prohibitively high fees for our immigration applications and renewals (which have to be made every 30 months), and regularly inflicts long and explained delays of a year before making decisions.

Response:

Question 1: What does citizenship and civic engagement mean in the 21st century? Why does it matter, and how does it relate to questions of identity?

To us, citizenship is made to be a complicated concept. In some ways, legal citizenship is our Holy Grail. It would mean an end to the uncertainty and fear with which we live constantly. It would mean that our families would no longer have to save all of our money to pay for the next Home Office application, every two and a half years. It would mean we would no longer have to take a
year out of our lives every two and a half years, as we wait for the Home Office to process our case and reconfirm our temporary ‘lawful’ status.

“I had to send away to the Home Office all my stuff which proves who I am or what I’ve done. All my certificates. Everything that I’ve had my whole life, I don’t have it now. So, there’s not much I can do, other than sit at home.”

Young man age 20 who was brought to the UK age 3. He has been waiting over a year for a decision on his application to the Home Office.

It would mean we could live and travel freely, knowing we could always return to our home. Our friends and peers, who we have grown up with since primary school have citizenship and they have none of these fears. The physical possession of a British passport would be confirmation that we have been accepted and are a part of the UK. We would then also be able to engage in civic life, without any barriers.

Yet the process of acquiring legal citizenship, for most of us still many years away, is so long and painful that the ‘Holy Grail’, may in the end be tainted. Many of us doubt that we will ever even get there, because if feels as if we are being made to jump through an ever increasing number of hoops, such as rising fees and reduced timescales in which to make our applications. How will we feel about this country, our home, when the government finally bestows upon us legal citizenship? Will we be thankful? Will we be able to forget the damage that has been done to us?

“I don’t understand. Why doesn’t this country want me?”

Let Us Learn member who has brought to the UK when she was 2 years old but was repeatedly refused ‘lawful’ status before being granted temporary leave to remain when she was 20 years old.

Citizenship is a complicated concept for us. If it were easier for us to obtain, we would feel differently.

Question 2: Citizenship is partly about membership and belonging. Are there ways we could strengthen people’s identity as citizens, whether they are citizens by birth or naturalisation? Could citizenship ceremonies or events throughout the educational process play a role? Should pride in being or becoming British be encouraged?

We are proud of who we are and of the contributions we make to society. Although this is our home, it is sometimes hard to feel pride in being British, and instead feel alienated from aspects of wider society because we are not allowed to be British. Our path to citizenship is so long and our characters apparently held in so much doubt by the Home Office that, should we ever even make it that far and become British citizens, the end goal will now have been tainted. Allow us to become citizens more readily, and this would be different.

“Am I supposed to be happy that they have given it to me now, after all these years? What was I before? I’ve lived here since I was a baby”

Let Us Learn campaigner, age 20

We do not feel that citizenship ceremonies would strengthen our connection with this country or make us better ‘citizens’. For most of us, if we are ever allowed to have legal citizenship, it would be an insult to make us attend a citizenship ceremony. We already feel that this is our home. Why
would we want to celebrate when this is finally recognised by the state, after a long period when we have been made to feel unwanted and unwelcome?

**Question 3:** Civic engagement can be seen as both a responsibility and a right of citizenship. Beyond the existing legal framework, should citizens have additional formal rights and responsibilities? How do you see the relationship between the two? Should they have the force of law individually or be presented as reciprocal duties between citizen and state? How should they be monitored and/or enforced?

Citizens should not have additional formal rights, because that would disadvantage those like us who are citizens in all but name. We are not legal citizens. Despite the fact that we have lived here most of our lives, we are already treated differently from our friends and peers who have British passports. For example, if one of us were to commit, say, a driving offence, this could mean losing our ‘lawful’ status and block our eventual path to citizenship. We could be deported to a country we have no memory of. This would not happen to our friends and peers, no matter what they do.

“Even now, even after all this time, I still think someone will come one day and take my visa away and I will have to leave”

*Let Us Learn campaigner, age 21.*

We have to pay very large sums of money to maintain our ‘lawful’ status every two and a half years. At present this costs £1500 before legal fees (legal aid was withdrawn in 2012). If our families cannot afford to maintain this ‘lawful’ status, we lose all of our rights and could be deported. This does not happen to our peers who hold legal citizenship. Some members of Let Us Learn were abandoned as children and have grown up in unofficial fostering relationships. None of us come from wealthy backgrounds; some live in families with a number of children in the same situation, and where our parents cannot afford to maintain everyone’s legal status every two and a half years. Some families have to choose which child will remain ‘lawful’.

“My leave to remain is expiring but unfortunately I’m currently not working. I’m a single mum and don’t really have support financially. The little I do have I’ve saved towards the £2300 for my renewal. I have £1500 but I don’t know where else to turn. I’m so desperate at this point I’ve tried to get a loan but because I’m currently unemployed I don’t qualify for a loan. Without my passport I cannot go to uni in September or even work”

*Young woman, age 24.*

**Question 5:** What should be the role of education in teaching and encouraging good citizenship? At what stages, from primary school through to university, should it be (a) available, and (b) compulsory? Should there be any exemptions? Should there be more emphasis on political participation, both inside and outside classes? How effective is current teaching? Do the curriculum and the qualifications that are currently offered need amending?

In our experience, citizenship and political participation are not spoken about enough in secondary school. Some feel that citizenship should be compulsory at GCSE and even in primary school lessons. We also believe that schools should have a responsibility to inform students about the limits to legal citizenship and of the fact that there are many young people who do not have citizenship in the UK. Most of us were not told about our immigration status by parents or guardians, or by our corporate parents. We believed what we were told: that if we studied hard at
school, we would have the opportunity to pursue our professional and other ambitions. Most of us realised this was not possible only when we applied for university.

“Nobody speaks about this. Nobody tells you. People in school didn’t tell me”
Young woman, age 19.

Question 9: Why do so many communities and groups feel “left behind”? Are there any specific factors which act as barriers to active citizenship faced by different communities or groups - white, BME, young, old, rural, urban? How might these barriers be overcome?

We do not feel left behind, we feel forcibly kept behind. We have done everything we can to ‘integrate’. We have forgotten our original languages and lost our accent, but we are still not allowed to be equal.

“If you want my full participation let me be a citizen”
Let Us Learn campaigner, age 24.

It is government policy to create a ‘hostile environment’ for migrants, and we are on the receiving end of that in our daily lives. During the many months when our papers are with the Home Office, our lives are on hold. Some of us have been turned down for jobs because of delays in processing renewal applications. The rhetoric of migrants coming to ‘take’ from society negatively affects us and how we feel we can contribute to this country, our home.

“If I am being told that I should be lucky to be given the opportunity to stay, I won’t feel confident in constantly putting my head above the parapet and being opinionated about things, as there is fear that I am overstepping the boundaries of my stay”
Let Us Learn campaigner, age 20.

Let Us Learn Campaigners would be happy to expand upon any of the answers contained within this document or to arrange a meeting with members. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact us.

8 September 2017