



MIGRANT ACTION
ADVOCACY | JUSTICE | EMPOWERMENT

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Hostile Charging Regimes:

Interrogating the Rationale of Visa Fees



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Abstract

The Home Office has announced another in a series of annual increases to visa fees which cover a wide range of visas, aligned with their policy goal of reducing net migration. With already some of the most expensive visa fees in the world, these increases are likely to further impact the lives of many migrants already financially struggling in the UK. The move also appears counterintuitive to the UK's best interests, with businesses, universities, and other institutions already sharing how they are struggling with the reduced migration that results from hostile policies like immigration charging regimes. Knowing the harm to individuals that these increases will have, as well as the institutions already struggling with reduced migration, the rationale for increasing visa fees must be examined. The increases are justified under a scheme of making all border activities 'self-funding': an argument which is flawed when learning fees are way over processing costs. The logic to make all migrants pay extortionate fees for their right to live in the UK undervalues not only the significant varied contributions migrants make to the UK economy and society, but also prioritizes state financial wellbeing over the wellbeing, dignity and humanity of migrants who are often forced into vulnerable and precarious living as a result of these charges.

Introduction

On the 19th of March 2025, the Home Office announced yet another hike in various Immigration and Nationality fees, coming into effect as of 9th April 2025(1). The majority of visa categories are experiencing a fee increase, meaning that almost everybody involved in the immigration system will be affected – visas around work, study, and nationality are all impacted(2). Visa fees have been incrementally increasing for the last 20 years(3), including a spike in 2024 which increased the Immigration Health Surcharge by 66%(4). The United Kingdom currently has some of the most expensive visa fees in the world(5), with these most recent increases demonstrating the continuity of an increasingly unaffordable immigration system. With many migrants in the UK already struggling with the financial challenge of the immigration process(6), and the mental distress that this can bring(7); these increases will undoubtedly make it even harder for people to work, study, settle, and thrive in the UK.

The rationale behind visa fees, and their progressive increases, is based on a goal to make most border control activities ‘self funded’(8) – reducing the contribution of taxpayer money on migration and border control(9). Over the last 20 years however, the government has increased immigration fees well beyond inflation rates(10) and visa fees are often charged at 7–10 times more than the cost of processing them(11). This represents an integral State process of generating revenue from migration(12).

Ironically, these rising fees have resulted in decreasing applications to work and study in the UK(13)– something which many economists(14), businesses(15), and institutions(16) are concerned will negatively impact the UK’s economy and social fabric. Whilst the harm that these increases will have on individual migrants financially, mentally, physically, and socially remains the most significant argument against the rising costs, it is important to acknowledge the other drawbacks of such an expensive immigration system and critically interrogate the rationale behind this inhumane policy of charging regimes.

Introduction

These increases, backed by the notion of self-funding the immigration system, are oblivious of the contributions made by migrants to the UK's social and economic environment, and the benefits that migration can bring. This is a clear message of hostility towards migrants by the UK Government, in line with their policy objective to 'reduce overall net migration'(17) whilst simultaneously relying on extractive migrant labour to support the functioning of essential services including the NHS, health and social care and provide the lifeblood of key sectors of our economy such as hospitality, farming, IT, retail, etc.(18) The government's repeated failure to meaningfully recognise the contribution that migrants have historically made to the UK's culture is an unfortunate pattern which will ultimately provide no benefits. Human beings should not have to pay ever-increasing amounts to be able to live and work where they feel safest and happiest. It is essential that visa fees are frozen, settlement routes are capped, and there is reform to the skilled worker scheme so that migrants in the UK can live the dignified lives they deserve.

It must be noted that expensive visa fees are situated in a broader context of a system of immigration charging that legitimises immigration controls and 'secures' the UK's internal borders by encouraging compliance with immigration policy.

These involve carrier(19), employer(20), and landlord(21) sanctions for transporting, hiring, and renting to migrants who do not have lawful status. However, rising visa fees make it increasingly hard for individuals to achieve or maintain lawful status(22) and pushes individuals into a position of illegality. This process of illegalisation that immigration charging regimes perpetuate situates this expensive immigration process as a hostile one which results in the criminalisation of migrants and perpetuates systemic hardship whilst encouraging employers and landlords to participate in immigration control.

The Effects of Rising Visa Fees

For migrant workers, the increase in costs of work visas will carry **an intense financial and emotional impact**. All work visas will experience a fee increase(23), meaning that the already high costs for individuals to migrate to and work in the UK will increase once again. Migrants rights organisations have long been sharing the difficulties faced by migrants due to the extortionate cost of visa fees and applications, on top of the Immigration Health Surcharge and additional costs like solicitor fees(24) – **two thirds of respondents of Migrant Voice’s 2022 briefing were struggling with debt due to the cost of visa applications**(25). The financial challenge of trying to manage application costs means that many individuals often must work long hours in exploitative jobs, do not have adequate food and housing for themselves and their family, and consequently struggle with their mental and physical health(26). With these costs set to increase, many workers are likely to be pushed into destitution, likely with no recourse to public funds(27).

The Effects of Rising Visa Fees

Moreover, the Certificate of Sponsorship (CoS) fee paid by organisations who employ migrants on skilled visas will rise by a staggering 120%– from £239 to £525(28). These increases place the sponsorship system in an even more dangerous and exploitative position, and pose a particular risk to already precarious migrant care workers on these schemes(29). The sponsorship scheme has repeatedly been criticised for facilitating the exploitation of workers(30)– with Migrants Rights Network describing the scheme as ‘State-Sponsored Modern Slavery(31). Individuals have experienced threats of their sponsorship being withdrawn; costs of recruitment and sometimes the CoS passed onto them; being faced with destitution after not being provided with work by their sponsor; wage theft, and being subjected to modern slavery(32). For example, Migrants at Work gathered evidence of this exploitation and found that some workers are having to pay an average of £17,000 for the CoS(33).

With the cost of this certificate set to rise substantially in April, it is more than likely to exacerbate this type of exploitation for migrants which is already occurring in this environment. Migrants Rights Network explains that when an employer holds power over a sponsored worker due to their immigration status, it can easily be abused(34). The power employers hold is set to increase with the fee increase, making the scope for exploitation wider. It is possible that fewer employers will engage in sponsorship schemes due to the heightened cost – making threats of sponsorship withdrawal, not being provided with work, and the increased cost of a visa application even more dangerous to the emotional and financial wellbeing of individuals. It is also likely that employers will demand more of migrants to cover the costs – Migrants Rights Network shares the story of a care assistant who had to work for 23 days in a row, with food and rent deducted from wages whilst being forced to live in their employers house(35), demonstrating the scope of exploitation under this scheme.

The Effects of Rising Visa Fees

The evidence provided by research from Migrants Rights Network and Migrants at Work on their campaign Justice for Sponsored Workers strongly suggests that these increases will not address the structural issues underpinning the exploitation and vulnerability of migrant workers, rather, it is likely to exacerbate the vulnerability to exploitation and other harmful and degrading treatment that these workers and their families are being exposed and subjected to. There is a clear duty to do more to award individuals on this scheme protection and compassion, and the Justice for Sponsored Workers campaign demands an end to the sponsorship system entirely, as it is inherently exploitative at its core(36).

At Migrant Action, we routinely encounter the wide ranging 'brutality' of the fee regimes expressed through the stories of people accessing our services. It ranges from mental and emotional traumas to precarious existence:

I was unable to make the application for my entire family due to the fees which meant that my children are not able to go on holidays abroad, but I can't tell them the true reason why, it breaks my heart. I know I am not alone as I have heard many people say this too

'It affects everything, your dignity, your quality of life; and you question your inability to afford basic things, it is hard to explain, it is dehumanizing'

It is these human effects that demonstrate the hostility and inhumanity of extortionate visa processes.

The Effects of Rising Visa Fees

For international students, the rise in study visa fees coincides with UK Universities experiencing a decreasing number of international student enrolments(37) – a move which appears counterintuitive to the sustaining of UK higher education institutions. UK Universities have been speaking about their struggle to maintain their institutions without the fees of international students (which can total £16,800 – £20,050 per year), with 1 in 6 universities relying on these fees for a third of their income(38). The increase in visa fees is additional to previous changes to the student visa which no longer allows students to bring family members with them(39). For many migrants, especially those with young children, this policy of ‘separation’ of families for immigration control purposes is punitive, hostile and unfair.

‘Being separated from your loved ones, especially when you move into a new country, is devastating emotionally and psychologically, you are constantly in two-worlds and sometimes in mental limbo’. (International student volunteer at Migrant Action).

Many international students cite this state hostility makes the UK increasingly unappealing to study in(40). Many organisations have discussed the negative impact on our communities that losing international students will carry, with George Blake warning that institutional collapse is a real possibility if no action is taken(41), as well as the fact that the UK will lose the considerable benefit to society that a diverse range of talented students brings. It is questionable why the pursuit of such policies by the Home Office continues to be viewed as constructive, unless it is viewed as deliberately enabling and embedding a ‘hostile environment’ for migrants in the UK.

The Effects of Rising Visa Fees

Finally, the increase in fees for Naturalisation (£1,500 to £1,605)(42) and Indefinite Leave to Remain (£2,885 to £3,029)(43) is another strand of hostility towards migrants by the UK government. When individuals reach the point of qualification for Naturalisation or Indefinite Leave to Remain, this is after years of paying ever-increasing visa fees, on top of the Immigration Health Surcharge (which increased to an extortionate £1035 in 2024)(44), and various other additional costs(45). This is for a minimum of 5 years, although more and more individuals are being placed on the 10 year route, which doubles both the costs and the risk of harm from the system(46). Charging a final fee for naturalisation or leave to remain is a move which, alongside having a financially crippling potential, carries the effect of othering migrants who are trying to settle and intentionally distinguishes them from British-born citizens.

Interrogating the Rationale for Visa Fee Increases

When there is considerable evidence of the damage that such an expensive immigration system perpetuates, the rationale for continuing to extract revenue from migrants must be critically examined.

Despite the campaigns by migration justice organisations against extortionate immigration charging regimes, including but not limited to visa fees, their very existence and regular increases have been rationalised on the premise that the immigration system needs to be entirely 'self-funded'(47), so that those who 'benefit most from the system are the ones who pay for it'(48). However, this justification is inherently flawed, firstly because visa fees are charged at 7-10 times the cost of processing them(49), meaning that migrants are not just paying for their immigration costs. This justification is also flawed however, because it overlooks the various and deep ways that the UK Government and citizens benefit from immigration. There has been long standing acknowledgment and research on the cultural contributions that migration has brought to the UK, alongside considerable economic benefits - so much so that there has been widespread concern on the negative impacts that attempting to reduce net migration will provide(50). Embodying this understanding has the effect of de-legitimizing such rationale for expensive visa fees and lays the groundwork for a more humane migration policy which benefits all.

Interrogating the Rationale for Visa Fee Increases

Migrants have contributed to the development of culture in the UK in various ways. Panayi (2008) has examined the influence of migration on developing a multicultural food culture in Britain, arguing 'The development of British food patterns since the Victorian period provides one of the clearest indications of the way in which migrants have impacted on the "British way of life", influencing consumption both inside and outside the home'(51)- citing influences from Caribbean, South Asian, Irish, Jewish, Chinese and Cypriot food on the British food landscape. Migration has also brought considerable developments to UK music, particularly the development of UK rap and hip-hop and the introduction of reggae music in the UK(52), and to both the entertainment and sporting industries(53). Overall, migration to the UK has brought multiculturalism to the UK, which has provided a widespread enrichment of life that transcends the construction of nationalist identity- 'When we wake up from our Swedish beds and step into our German cars driven by Arabic logarithms and American technology, when we drink our Italian coffee and eat our Chinese takeaway, when we listen to Jamaican music through Japanese sound systems, when we connect with each other on the basis of our shared humanity rather than an abstract nationality, we are all the richer for it'(54). It must also be mentioned the integral role that migration played in developing the UK's National Health Service(55), emphasising the extent the UK government and citizens benefit from migration.

Interrogating the Rationale for Visa Fee Increases

Alongside the cultural and social enrichment which migration provides, there is long-standing acknowledgement and research of the significant economic benefit that migration can bring to the UK, including by the Home Office(56). This includes migrant contributions to public finance(57), the filling of labour shortages(58) and overall driving economic growth(59), with a particular impact in technological and infrastructure fields(60) . Whilst engaging with this argument can present a dangerous frame that migrants have to contribute economically in order to deserve humane treatment under the immigration process, it is still important to acknowledge this contribution when dismantling/interrogating the rationale behind visa fee processing. Acknowledging the economic benefit that migration provides offers a lens for criticising migration as a source of revenue extraction, as well as challenging the overall policy goal of reducing migration. Ultimately, it challenges the notion that migrants are the main beneficiary of migration and therefore the rationale behind such an expensive visa fee process. The significant contributions made by migrants in all facets of UK society, (economically, socio-culturally, politically, etc.) has been extensively acknowledged and documented. This continues to be increasingly the case, making it counterintuitive to place such 'burden of responsibility' of self-funding the immigration system, whilst not less than proportionate out of the system.

Interrogating the Rationale for Visa Fee Increases

Whilst contributions that migrants have made and continue to make on the UK are significant, the humanity of migrants should be enough to justify an end to the system of economic hostility which is devastating lives, and is not likely to even achieve the Government's aim of reducing migration. As Colin Yeo of Free Movement explains,

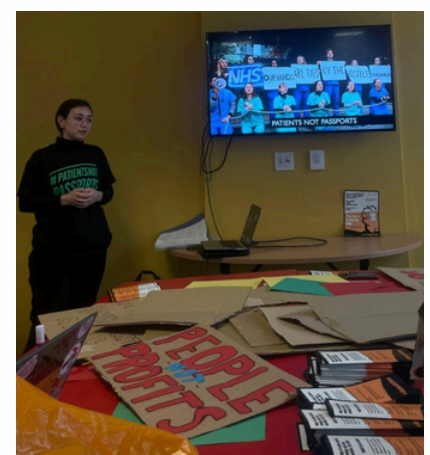
'These sorts of unpredictable increases make it impossible for a migrant family to budget for the future. It is unlikely to force many to leave the country but it will without doubt make their lives much harder and it may force some into "illegality". Imagine you cannot afford a settlement visa after five years of residence because the fee has increased beyond your means. You now have two children as well as a partner. You aren't going to leave or uproot the whole family; you'll just stay and hope for the best.'(61)

The devastating effects that these increases can have on people subjected to immigration controls including but not limited to extortionate visa charges, have been extensively documented. At a time of increasing uncertainty and economic precarity, particularly for groups forced to exist at the edges of mainstream economic activity and largely inaccessible to the state welfare safety nets, a more humane and compassionate approach to visa charging regimes would constitute good policy making.

Transforming the hostility of Immigration Charging Regimes: Migrant Action Response

Collective Justice Campaigning

Building power and solidarity for collective justice campaigning against state-enabled hostility towards migrants including but not limited to immigration charging regimes is central to the pursuit of migration, racial and social justice. Ramping up immigration charges is causing significant harm and fueling a hostile migration narrative and reality. Through building power and solidarity with migration, racial and social justice grassroots movements rooted in lived experience of intersectional systemic injustice, we can contribute towards transforming the structures that underpin and perpetuate migration hostility including but not limited to policy and other state-led apparatus. An example of such campaigns is Migrant Voice's (charity) visa fees campaign that continues to work collaboratively with other agencies campaigning against visa fees and long settlement routes since 2020. Migrant Action is part of this campaigning collaboration underpinned by the casework support we provide to migrants.



We have collaborated with them to participate in National Days of Action against visa fees(62).

Transforming the hostility of Immigration Charging Regimes: Migrant Action Response

Collective Justice Campaigning

There are various ways to contribute to this campaign:

“For those directly affected: Get in touch with the team at Migrant Voice and Migrant Action to share your experiences and get involved in any part of our campaign. You are invited and welcome to take part in our network meetings, training, and lobby activities.

We are also keen to engage with **policy makers** who are impassioned by our vision for re-imagining humane, fair and just migration to build allyship. We need your help to put an end to extortionate costs and call for a fairer immigration system. We want to meet with you and your team to discuss how these visa costs and processes are directly affecting your constituents and communities. Politicians can help us raise awareness of the impact of extortionate visa fees, host our listening and lobby events and help us make change.

For **Individuals:** Speak out, Speak about visa costs at home, at workplace, with your friends, faith group, union, on social media. Help spread our message and our campaign so more people can join in.”(63)

Another way that individuals can contribute to resisting extortionate fees is to play an active role in your community- **build community resilience by contributing to mutual aid projects, listening to the experiences of individuals affected, organising and sharing resources between individuals and households** so that everyone can have what they need, and holding space for people to come and be together - all of which can help **build a larger plan to take direct action** with your community against the scheme.

Transforming the hostility of Immigration

Charging Regimes: Migrant Action Response

Casework Solidarity Support

Migrant Action's frontline campaign is rooted in our casework solidarity support for migrants who are at the 'hard edges' of migration policy. Our frontline activities offer safe and trusted spaces for people to be listened to, assisted and empowered. Our casework solidarity is not limited to those we support but extends to those we work in collaboration and partnership to enable equity and quality access to service provision whilst enabling systemic justice and transformative system change.

Migration Economic Justice

The pursuit of migration justice without economic justice is a hollow aspiration. Extortionate charging regimes, labour extraction and exploitation, human trafficking and modern day slavery, wage theft, precarious working constitute a wider web of perpetual structural racism and economic vulnerability that migrants are routinely exposed to. Existing within a vicious cycle of economic injustice, migrants are navigating the hostile migration environment without the prospects of durable access to rights, justice and liberation to lead independent and fulfilling lives.

Migrant Action is building a new grassroots migrant Economic Justice Collaboration initiative aiming to build a new architecture for interrogating extractive exploitative economic regimes that are harming migrants towards building alternative economies and migrant-led eco-systems for economic justice. This new architecture would enable migrants to re-imagine humane and liberatory economic futures where migrants are not 'tools' for extraction, rather become architects of their own dreams for economic liberation.

Within this new architecture, Migrant Action would support migrant workers to build knowledge, capacity, leadership, and infrastructures for building new solidarity economies, wealth creation, and systemic advocacy for migration justice. If you are excited and want to know more about our migration economic justice vision get in touch with the team at Migrant Action - all are welcome and individuals who are affected are particularly encouraged to get involved.

In essence, for Migrant Action, transforming the immigration charging regimes is part of a wider campaign for migration justice which has various intersections and requires solidarity and collective justice by all movements resisting systemic injustice.

Footnotes

- (1): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/visa-regulations-revised-table/home-office-immigration-and-nationality-fees-9-april-2025>
- (2): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/visa-regulations-revised-table/home-office-immigration-and-nationality-fees-9-april-2025>
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- (8): <https://www.peoplemanagement.co.uk/article/1907925/impact-rising-cost-immigration>
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(63): <https://www.migrantvoice.org/take-action>



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