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Mr Liam Byrne
Minister of Immigration
The Home Office
2 Marsham Street
London SW1 4DF

Dear Minister

UK Yankee is a community of North Americans who have immigrated to the UK. We operate under a management scheme which is self-funding and driven by volunteer commitment. At the last reckoning our membership stood at 5,135 of which approximately 3,500 are active. Our membership base draws Americans in all aspects and stages of immigration, but by far and away our heaviest membership comes from those in the Family Formation and Youth Mobility Programmes. This is to say that we are predominantly spouses, fiancés, and partners of someone settled in the UK, and we ourselves are on a settlement track.

Our immigration forum plays a vital role in keeping members aware of changes in the rules and how changes in the rules may affect them. Participation in our forums is open to anyone, but our immigration forum is regularly monitored by an adviser licensed by the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner.

We have been in continuous operation since 1999, and we are not politically aligned. This is the first time we have undertaken formal correspondence to the Government with the intent of advocacy. To this end, I should like to address several issues, most importantly the increase in fees.

The proposed fee increases will cause significant financial hardship both for many of us along with other immigrants across the UK. With just four weeks' notice of the new charging scheme, those who are due to apply for settlement within the next few months will now have to produce more than double the fee that they were anticipating in a very short amount of time, which for some will cause a severe financial strain. For others, paying the higher fees will prove to be impossible, and they will be forced to renew their present immigration status without receiving the settlement that they otherwise qualify for. Some settled people in the UK who wish to apply for nationality will be unable to afford the increased charge, and thus prevented from fully participating in UK society. Those applying for settlement visas from outside of the UK may experience a significant delay in family reunification because of these new charges, and many other immigration categories will also be adversely affected.

The sheer cost of many of the increases are prohibitive to many, but younger people and those with children will be the hardest hit by these new fees. Many of those applying for spousal and civil partnership visas are relatively young and not yet fully established economically, and apply for Indefinite Leave to Remain as they are in the midst of developing new careers in a new country. The proposed cost for ILR is now as much or more than a month's worth of rent and bills, and many who are in a lower economic bracket will simply not be able to afford it. Those with families often have tighter budgets as well, and many ILR applicants are couples who may have very young children in the house and not have the means to gather the necessary funds which are significantly more than they had budgeted for.

We also believe that these fee increases place an unfairly high price on several different immigration categories, regardless of the applicant's ability to pay. Putting a price on the value of Indefinite Leave to Remain or British nationality above and beyond the cost of processing the application penalizes those who are here because they need to be with their family members. In addition, any monetary amount attached to the value of an immigration status is arbitrary and therefore indefensible; as such value is ultimately unquantifiable due to the vastly different circumstances of individual immigrants.

In addition to the increase in fees, other policy changes will exacerbate the issue. Because of the requirement for successfully passing the Life In the UK exam prior to the issuance of Indefinite Leave to Remain, and therefore preventing those who have been in long term marriages and civil partnerships from obtaining permanent residence when initially settling in the UK, means those who settle in the UK with their British spouse/partner will have to pay a total of £1825 in fees compared with £460 as of today. This represents a 296% increase in fees.

In closing we would seek to remind you that many of us are derived from an ethic that eschews access to public funds and we are cheerfully integrating into British society as a matter of family cohesion. This distinction has not always been clear in your statements and the British public has endured confusion as a result. We hope that more aggressive steps can be taken to acknowledge the value of those immigrants who are growing families here. Please take these concerns into consideration with a view towards commissioning a working group so that a fair charging scheme can be put in place that we can all take pride in.

Yours sincerely,

Leah Davies
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