

Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) organisational response to the Home Office etc. Earned settlement consultation

February 2026

About RCGP

We are the professional membership body for GPs in the UK. Our purpose is to encourage, foster and maintain the highest possible standards in general medical practice. We support GPs through all stages of their career, from medical students considering general practice, through to training, qualified years and retirement.

Consultation questions

Earned settlement

[Home Office etc.: In this section, we invite your views on the proposed Earned Settlement framework, including how clearly the changes are explained. Before continuing, please take a moment to review the proposed reforms as outlined in this Paper.]

'Earned settlement' is a principle that recognises the value of long-term contribution to the UK. Rather than granting settlement automatically after a fixed period, this approach requires individuals to demonstrate sustained commitment (through work, community involvement, or other meaningful contributions) before being granted permanent status.

The proposed framework sets a starting point of 10 years before settlement can be obtained. This duration may be reduced based on positive indicators (e.g. contributing to the Exchequer by earning a certain salary) or extended based on negative indicators (e.g. reliance on public funds).]

1. Overall, how clear do you find the proposed changes to the settlement framework?

- Very clear
- Somewhat clear
- Neither clear nor unclear
- **X Somewhat unclear**
- Very unclear
- Don't know / prefer not to say

2. [If unclear] Which aspects of the proposed changes to settlement are not clear?

- The concept of earned settlement
- The overall purpose

- Which groups may be eligible for exemptions from the 10-year qualifying period
 - **X How reductions to the qualifying period will be applied**
 - How extensions to the qualifying period will be applied
 - How reductions and/or extensions will be applied if applicants meet multiple criteria
 - How the proposed changes will apply to dependants and children
 - Other (please specify)
- 3. Overall, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the proposed changes to the settlement framework?**
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - **X Strongly disagree**
 - Don't know / prefer not to say

Character

[Home Office etc.: This question focuses on 'Character', the first of the four core pillars designed to ensure that applicants make a meaningful contribution to UK society and meet clear, measurable standards.

To be eligible for settlement, applicants will need to meet the suitability requirements set out in the existing Immigration Rules ([Part Suitability](#)).

This reformed system will, as now, provide for the refusal of applications where core requirements relating to their character and conduct (for example, having a criminal conviction, non-compliance with immigration requirements and considerations pertaining to the public good). It will be mandatory to meet such requirements and there will be no ability to trade with other considerations to determine the qualifying period.]

- 1. Do you have any comments on how 'Character' should be considered in relation to settlement?**

N/A

Integration

[Home Office etc.: This section focuses on 'Integration'. To be eligible for settlement applicants will need to demonstrate meaningful engagement with British society. This includes passing a Life in the UK test and speaking English at an upper intermediate level (B2 standard under the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages).

Under the proposed reforms, applicants who can demonstrate advanced English language ability (at C1 standard) will be able to reduce their route to settlement by one year. C1 level under the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages means the user is proficient and able to perform complex tasks related to social, academic, and professional situations.]

1. What do you think about a 1-year reduction for applications [sic] who can demonstrate advanced English language ability (at C1 standard)?

- The reduction doesn't go far enough (it should be longer than 1 year)
- The reduction is about right
- The reduction goes too far (it should be shorter than 1 year)
- There should be no reduction for these applicants
- **X Don't know / prefer not to say**

2. How do you think integration should be assessed? (please select all that apply)

- Through a formal test (such a revised Life in the UK Test)
- Through gathered ongoing evidence (such as participation in certified English-Language education or employment/volunteering evidence)
- Through completing a cultural orientation course once arrived in the UK
- Through character references from public services professional and British Nationals
- Through evidence of learning and participation within the wider community (including testimonies from relevant organisations/groups)
- In another way (please specify)
- **X Don't know / prefer not to say**

3. Do you have any further comments on how 'Integration' should be considered in relation to settlement?

N/A

Contribution

[Home Office etc.: This section focuses on 'Contribution'. This reinforces the principle that settlement should be earned through active participation in the economy and wider society. To be eligible for settlement applicants must:

- *Have contributed to the Exchequer by having annual earnings above £12,570 for a minimum of 3 to 5 years (subject to this consultation), in line with the current thresholds for paying income tax and National Insurance Contributions (NICs), or an alternative amount of income. Please note, however, that these income-related thresholds would not track future changes to the tax system.*
- *Have no outstanding litigation, NHS, tax or other government debt.]*

1. Do you think the following groups should be exempt from the requirement to have earned above £12,750 for at least 3 to 5 years?

	Yes	No	Don't know / prefer not to say
Those on maternity leave or long-term illness/disability			X
Those in certain occupations with different pay arrangements (e.g. Ministers of Religion)			X

2. Are there any other groups that you think should be exempt from the requirement to have earned above £12,750 for at least 3 to 5 years?

N/A

3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that migrants who have worked in an occupation below RQF level 6 should have their standard qualifying period for settlement set at 15 years?

[Home Office etc.: Occupations skilled to RQF level 6 are those which require a qualification equivalent to degree level or higher. You can read more about what kind of qualifications this includes [here](#).]

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- X Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know / prefer not to say

4. To what extent do you agree or disagree that applicants who earn a taxable income above £50,270 should be eligible for a reduction in their time to settlement?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- X Don't know / prefer not to say

[Home Office etc.: Under the proposed reforms, applicants who earn a taxable income above a certain threshold for 3 years prior to applying for settlement may qualify for settlement sooner.]

5. What do you think about the proposed reductions for applicants based on their annual taxable income?

The reduction doesn't go far enough (it should be longer)	The reduction is about right	The reduction goes too far (it should be shorter)	There should be no reduction for these applicants	Don't know / prefer not to say
7-year reduction for applicants who earn a taxable income above £125,140				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
5-year reduction for applicants who earn a taxable income above £50,270				<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

6. Do you think those employed in a public service occupation (i.e. health and education occupations where going rates are based on national pay scales) should be eligible for a reduction in their qualifying period to settlement?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know / prefer not to say

[Home Office etc.: Under the proposed reforms, applicants who claim public funds (e.g. benefits and housing assistance) would face a penalty depending on the length of time they claimed public funds during their route to settlement.]

The Home Office recognises that some applicants (such as those from vulnerable groups) may have extenuating circumstances to claim public funds. Later questions will explore whether specific groups should be exempt from the proposed reforms.]

7. What do you think about the proposed penalties for applicants claiming public funds?

[Home Office etc.: Ensuring that the UK can remain compliant with its international obligations, these penalties would exclude migrants covered by Trade Continuity Agreements and Social Security Coordination Agreements.]

	The penalty doesn't go far enough (it should be longer)	The penalty is about right	The penalty goes too far (it should be shorter)	There should be no penalty for these applicants	Don't know / prefer not to say
5-year penalty for applicants who claim public funds for less than 12 months during their route to settlement					X
10-year penalty for applicants who claim public funds for more than 12 months during their route to settlement					X

8. To what extent do you agree or disagree that once someone has been granted settlement in the UK they should be eligible to claim public funds (e.g. benefits and housing assistance)?

[Home Office etc.: Ensuring that the UK can remain compliant with its international obligations, any change would need to take account of migrants covered by Trade Continuity Agreements, Social Security Coordination Agreements and other international obligations.]

- Strongly agree
- X Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know / prefer not to say

[Home Office etc.: The Home Office recognises the vital role that volunteers play in delivering positive change to their communities, the environment and the lives of others. Volunteers, including those who are migrants, are a valued part of British life and their contributions enrich communities across the country.

The Home Office is considering whether giving back to the local community, for example, through volunteering, should be recognised as a form of contribution towards earned settlement.]

9. To what extent do you agree or disagree that giving back to the local community (e.g. by volunteering) should be considered as a contribution that can reduce the length of time required to qualify for settlement?

- Strongly agree
- **X Agree**
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know / prefer not to say

10. [If organisation] Does your organisation currently accept or manage volunteers?

- Yes
- No
- **X Don't know / prefer not to say**

11. Not applicable to RCGP

12. Not applicable to RCGP

13. Do you have any further comments on how 'Contributions' should be considered in relation to settlement, including any potential benefits or challenges of recognising giving back to the community as a contribution towards settlement? [Word count max 200]

The Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) disagrees that the current five-year qualification period for indefinite leave to remain (ILR) is justified. Unlike many other medical specialties, GP training lasts three years, meaning international GPs are not eligible to apply for ILR on completion of training. However, successful completion of UK GP training is in itself clear and measurable evidence of long-term contribution to the NHS.

The NHS invests substantial resources in training international doctors (with GP training costing approximately £485,000 per trainee, according to a 2015 DHSC response to a written Parliamentary question). It is therefore a poor use of public resources to train international GPs only for them to leave the UK because of immigration uncertainty or difficulties securing visa sponsorship from practices.

We are also concerned that increasing the qualifying period for settlement to 15 years for overseas health and care workers in roles below RQF level 6 – including nursing associates, social care workers and other essential support staff – would lead to significant numbers of people in these roles leaving the UK or choosing not to come. This would indirectly exacerbate existing workforce pressures in general practice, to the detriment of both GPs and patients.

Residence

[Home Office etc.: This section focuses on ‘Residence’. This pillar aims to recognise lawful, continuous residence in the UK. In order to meet the qualifying period for settlement, applicants will need to have spent the required time in the UK on a route, or routes, that leads to settlement as set out in the existing [Immigration Rules](#).

Under the proposed reforms, a person’s pathway to settlement will also depend on their history of compliance with immigration laws. Applicants who arrived in the UK illegally (e.g. via a small boat), arrived in the UK on a visit visa, or who have overstayed their visa for 6 months or more, will have additional time added to their standard qualifying period for settlement, or prevented from settling in the UK altogether.]

1. Which of the following penalties do you think should be applied to each of the following applicants?

	A penalty of 20 years	A penalty of 10 years	A penalty of 5 years	There should be no penalty for these applicants	Don't know / prefer not to say
Applicants who arrived in the UK illegally					X
Applicants who initially entered the UK on a temporary visit visa (typically this visa permits stays of up to 6 months for tourism, visiting family or friends or short-term business activities)					X
Applicants who have overstayed their original visa by 6 months or more					X

2. Do you have any further comments on how 'Residence' should be considered in relation to settlement?

N/A

Eligibility and Equalities

[Home Office etc.: This section focuses on whether specific groups (including potentially vulnerable groups) should be exempt from, or receive reductions to, the proposed earned settlement reforms.]

1. Where the standard qualifying period is proposed to increase from 5 to 10 years, which option for [sic] you think should apply to each of the following visa holder groups?

[Home Office etc.: The government remains steadfast in its support for members of the Hong Kong community in the UK and is fully committed to the BN(O) route, which will continue to welcome Hong Kongers. We fully recognise the significant contribution that Hong Kongers have already made to the UK, and the role they will continue to play in the years ahead. That is why those on the BN(O) visa route will continue to be able to settle in the UK after living here for five years.]

We want to continue to attract the brightest and best exceptional talent that attracts investment, creates jobs, accelerates productivity and promotes growth through our targeted immigration routes: Global Talent for the most talented leaders and potential leaders and Innovator Founder for the most talented entrepreneurs.]

	Reduction (of 5 or 7 years from the standard qualifying period of 10 years)	Apply full change (standard qualifying period of 10 years)	Don't know / prefer not to say
Applicants who currently require 3 years continuous residence under the Global Talent route			X
Applicants who currently require 5 continuous years residence under the Global Talent route			X
Applicants who currently require 3			X

Reduction (of 5 or 7 years from the standard qualifying period of 10 years)	Apply full change (standard qualifying period of 10 years)	Don't know / prefer not to say
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continuous years
residence under the
Innovator Founder
route

Applicants on
humanitarian visa
routes (e.g. Syrian,
Afghan)

X

2. To what extent do you agree or disagree that dependants of migrants who hold Global Talent or Innovator Founder visa status should retain their current 5-year path to settlement?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- X Don't know / prefer not to say

3. To what extent do you agree or disagree that there should not be transitional arrangements for those already on a pathway to settlement?

[Home Office etc.: Transitional arrangements refer to temporary measures which are designed to ease the impact of the new rules for those already in the UK and on an existing pathway to settlement.]

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- X Strongly disagree
- Don't know / prefer not to say

[Home Office etc.: The current immigration system includes provisions that protect the most vulnerable in society by allowing them to settle in the UK.]

For example, a person on the family route whose relationship ends because they are a victim of domestic abuse can settle immediately. Similarly, a person on the family route whose partner dies can also settle immediately.

There are special arrangements for children and young adults who have grown up in the UK without an immigration status, allowing them to settle 5 years after regularising their status. Please note references to children and young adults in this section does not mean children in care or care leavers, for which separate targeted [sic] will take in place in due course.

Finally, adults with long-term care needs can join a close relative in the UK and settle where the care they require is not available or affordable in their home country.]

4. Do you think the following vulnerable groups should retain their current arrangements and be exempt from the proposed settlement changes?

	Yes	No	Don't know / prefer not to say
Victims of domestic violence and abuse	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
Bereaved partners			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Children and young adults who grew up in the UK without immigration status	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		
Adults with long-term care needs	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>		

5. Are there any other vulnerable groups that you think should be considered as part of this consultation?

N/A

[Home Office etc.: The Armed Forces Covenant is a national commitment to ensure that those who serve or have served in HM Armed Forces are not disadvantaged because of their service. Individuals who have completed the minimum term of service (4 years), or who were medically discharged from service, can apply for settlement immediately upon leaving the Armed Forces. This provision also extends to their immediate family members, including partners and children. The government is committed to at least maintaining the current time periods to settlement for HM Armed Forces and their immediate family members.]

6. Do you think the following Armed Forces groups should retain their current time period to settlement or should further reductions be available to this group?

	Retain current arrangements	Further reductions should be applied	Don't know / prefer not to say
Members of HM Armed Forces			X
Immediate family members of HM Armed Forces			X

[Home Office etc.: Currently, most dependant partners of migrants can settle at the same time as the main applicant without meeting any additional conditions. Dependant partners of economic migrants who benefit from accelerated settlement do not themselves benefit from a reduced settlement period. Under the proposed reforms, dependant partners will have their own qualifying period based on their individual circumstances.]

For children, it is recognised that they cannot meet certain requirements under the earned settlement proposals, such as National Insurance Contributions (NICs). The Home Office intends to keep a window for those admitted as dependants under 18 to settle at the same time as their parents, while considering an age cut-off after which they would need to follow their own route to qualify for settlement.]

7. To what extent do you agree or disagree that dependant partners of migrants should earn settlement in their own right?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- X Strongly Disagree
- Don't know / prefer not to say

8. To what extent do you agree or disagree that dependant children of migrants should earn settlement in their own right? (with employment-related requirements waived if they were admitted as a dependant under 18)

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- X Strongly Disagree
- Don't know / prefer not to say

9. To what extent do you agree or disagree that resettled refugees should have a 10-year route to settlement?

[Home Office etc.: Resettled refugees are those who have been granted protection and moved to the UK through official resettlement programmes.]

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- **X Don't know / prefer not to say**

10. Not applicable to RCGP

11. Not applicable to RCGP

12. Do you have any further comments on how specific groups should be considered in relation to settlement? We particularly welcome views on how the proposed changes could affect children in the UK. [Word count max. 200]

The RCGP is concerned about the impact of making it harder for GPs' families to settle in the UK. The current and proposed five-year qualification period for ILR affects not only the professional lives of international GPs, but also their personal and family circumstances. Repeated visa renewals, rising costs and the risk of gaps in sponsorship place strain on families, creating uncertainty and the possibility of sudden relocation. This undermines long-term integration, community stability and effective future planning.

When choosing where to work internationally, doctors consider the security and integration prospects of their entire family. Longer waits and higher fees for dependants to secure leave to remain are likely to deter doctors from working in the UK. Without explicit protections for dependants, exemptions offered to doctors themselves are unlikely to be effective. Family stability is central to wellbeing and to doctors' willingness to remain in NHS roles; ongoing insecurity can discourage long-term commitments and lead to workforce instability, negatively affecting continuity of patient care.

The NHS is heavily reliant on overseas recruitment to fill workforce gaps, particularly in general practice. While we support the Government's plans to expand domestic recruitment, increasing the number of UK-trained GPs will inevitably take time.

Impact on organisations

[Home Office etc.: This section focuses on how the proposed earned settlement reforms may impact your organisation.]

1. [If organisation] To what extent, if at all, do you think the proposed reforms will impact your organisation in the following ways?

	Very positive impact	Somewhat positive impact	No impact	Somewhat negative impact	Very negative impact	Not applicable	Don't know / prefer not to say
Ability to attract suitable candidates							X
Ability to retain existing migrant workers							X
Workforce planning							X
Administrative burden							X

2. Not applicable to RCGP
3. Not applicable to RCGP
4. Not applicable to RCGP
5. [If organisation] Please provide any evidence you may have on whether the proposed changes might influence visa applicants' or visa holders' decisions to come to or remain in the UK. [Word count max. 200]

Current visa pathways influence whether international GPs remain in the UK after qualification. Short sponsorship periods and complex eligibility criteria for ILR create uncertainty at a critical career stage, leading some international GPs to reconsider their future in UK general practice.

These challenges are acute in general practice, where training lasts three years rather than five. As a result, international GPs cannot apply for ILR on qualification and often struggle to secure visa-sponsoring roles, undermining retention at a time of severe GP shortages. Our 2025 joint survey with the BMA of 521 GPs and registrars who either needed or recently obtained a visa found that 71% struggled to find visa-sponsoring roles. 62% of those said ongoing visa barriers would make them consider leaving the UK. Based on the number of

CCTs awarded in 2025, we estimate that around 1,580 (40%) newly qualified GPs this year will require a visa, yet only 29% of practices offer visa sponsorship.

If the ILR qualifying period remains at five years, workforce instability and stress will persist, risking further loss of trained GPs. Granting ILR on completion of GP training would support retention, protect public investment and demonstrate that the UK values international GPs' contributions.

6. [If organisation] Do you have any further comments on the potential impacts on your organisation in relation to the proposed changes to settlement?

N/A