



# **RAMP Submission to Citizenship Inquiry**

**October 2019**





# *RAMP Submission to British Future Citizenship Inquiry*

## **About the RAMP Project**

The RAMP (Resettlement, Asylum and Migration Policy) project is a cross-party initiative which seeks to reimagine a world-class ethical migration system for a successful and integrated Britain. A system which works for all of us: for communities, for businesses and for migrants.

Started in January 2018, RAMP achieves this by:

- **Seconding high-quality researchers and advisers to a range of politicians, both within parliament and across our cities, so that they can think more deeply and collaborate more widely on migration and integration issues.**
- **Bringing together leaders from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives to work together on policies and programmes that can command support across the spectrum of public opinion.**
- **Providing secretariat support for the APPG on Migration**

**Advisers are currently working with Kate Green MP, Tim Farron MP, Steve Double MP, the Bishop of Durham Paul Butler, and the Mayor of Bristol Marvin Rees.**

## **RAMP and British Citizenship**

RAMP's role is to identify those issues on which broad, cross-party consensus on the migration-related challenges and opportunities facing the UK is possible. Since the project's start, citizenship has been one of the key topics that we have identified and worked on. British Citizenship is of vital importance to debates around the future of our immigration system, local integration, and our national identity. We should be proud that many people are seeking to become British Citizens. The decisions our Prime Minister and the Home Office are about to make on our new immigration system and, in particular, the criteria and process to obtain British Citizenship, will shape the kind of country we are for years to come.

This is a chance for the UK to be clear about the core values that guide us to celebrate the contribution that new British Citizens make to our national story. If approached positively and with imagination, citizenship policy can boost civic engagement and social integration, whilst at the same time promoting a positive vision of the UK both here and abroad.

To fully seize this opportunity, in our view the Government should:

- i) Look at ways to offer a bespoke pathway to citizenship after Brexit for EU citizens who have played by the rules and want to be British
- ii) Review the status of residual categories of British nationality e.g. British National (Overseas) to modernise our immigration system

- iii) Consider options to reduce the high visa fees facing some people in the UK
- iv) Reform how decisions are made at the Home Office so that those who meet the Home Office's criteria and wish to apply should be able to do so with a minimum of hassle and inconvenience
- v) Improve the user experience of those applying for Citizenship and ensuring that the Citizenship application process is fit-for-purpose in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain

These are all issues that we believe offer the opportunity to make meaningful progress on a vital issue in a way that can unite people both within Parliament and across the country. At a time of great national upheaval and with our public discourse often bitter and divided, a clear focus on citizenship has the potential to be a focal point for rebuilding unity.

## Customer Experience of Citizenship Application

*"I see myself as British, but this process has made me feel like I don't belong here anymore."*

As well as identifying broad areas that are ripe for building cross-party support, we have also been able to conduct a deep-dive piece of qualitative research on people's experience of applying to become British Citizens, using a Customer Experience approach. This submission focuses on that piece of research as a contribution to the Inquiry's work. We believe that taking a customer experience approach to citizenship seriously would make a significant difference for hundreds of thousands of people every year, setting them on a pathway to greater integration and thereby unlocking their potential contribution to the community and nation they have chosen to make home.

This approach has already been adopted in many areas of the public sector. In particular, in 2012 GOV.UK began a Digital Transformation journey to become digital by default. The government has redesigned and rebuilt some of the most used public services, and digital professionals have been established across the public sector. These government services have been designed using customer experience principles, service design thinking and customer co-creation with customer input at every stage.

## Our Research

The research looked at the experiences of people who have recently applied for UK Citizenship through one-to-one and group interviews to understand current customer experiences of each stage of the process. It also looked at how that experience is building or reducing citizen confidence - confidence in themselves as members of society, and confidence in the system of government in the UK.

There are two core customer journeys for citizenship applicants. According to Government statistics, most people are accepted on their first application (Journey 1), but there is a significant minority who get rejected and have to apply again before being accepted (Journey 2).

**Journey 1 - Trigger > Seek Help > Apply > Accepted > Ceremony**

**Journey 2 - Trigger > Seek Help > Apply > Rejected > Apply Again > Accepted > Ceremony**



## Trigger

'Trigger' refers to an event that might compel someone to begin the process of applying for British Citizenship. From the people that we spoke to, the trigger that starts the citizenship application process can vary from a desire to convert Indefinite Leave To Remain into Citizenship, to a (sometimes shocking) discovery by people that they aren't actually UK Citizens. This latter example is often made by young people who have lived in the UK for a time. For example, they apply to go to University and are offered the Foreign Student costs, or need a Passport for a school trip, and discover they can't get one. This can cause feeling of anxiety and worry, and even cause people to question their identity. Whilst there may not be anything that the Home Office can do to influence these triggers, it is important to understand that people may be entering the process with low levels of confidence in themselves and the system. As one of the people we spoke to put it, *"I had assumed I was British, until I started to apply and they made me feel like I'm not actually British."*

## Seek Help

'Seek help' refers to the different ways in which people might try to get advice or support to make a citizenship application. From our interviews this can vary depending on current confidence levels and resources. If confidence is high, or if someone's financial resources are constricted, they usually seek advice online, typically from one of several Facebook Groups set up to help people with the process of UK Citizenship application. However, there can be concerns about the quality of this information, which can lead to confusion and doubt. If confidence is low they usually seek and receive legal advice, although the resource implications of this can cause concerns.

## Apply

The next stage of the process is an online application, followed by an English Language test and a 'Life in the UK' test. It's at this stage when the biggest pain points crystallise. The language used is often demoralising or confusing, reducing confidence. It's also at this stage that the costs come to the front of people's minds.

Key examples of problematic language that were raised in our interviews are:



*“Leave to remain”* - this appears like contradictory English, and is confusing for people, especially when English is a second language.

*“Illegal status”, “Non-legal entity”* - perceived as officious and judgemental.

*“You are not legally present”* - both confusing and confidence reducing.

*“Undocumented”* - which some people perceive as being told they are “unclean”.

This language appears primarily in the **Apply** stage in the journey, but it does crop up at other stages too, most notably when in contact with the Home Office.

Concerns about cost also surfaced particularly at the **Apply** stage. Today, a typical journey might start with a tourist visa, then limited leave to remain (£1k), then indefinite leave to remain (£2k+), then citizenship (£1.3k) + lawyers fees if they need help (£300++). Because people go through the limited leave to remain step several times, before being granted indefinite leave to remain, the whole end-to-end process can cost upward of £10k per person in fees paid to the Government.

Multiply that up for a family of four @ £40k+ and it soon becomes unaffordable for many families. These levels of cost are driving inequality of access to becoming a UK Citizen, and causing people to make heartbreaking decisions to prioritise different members of their family. As one person we spoke to explained - *“We only had enough money for one of us to apply; my brother had to wait”*. Furthermore, if the various forms are incomplete or rejected, the fees are still paid, and if the application is rejected due to some technical reason, the citizen must reapply and they must pay again. This is an unintended consequence of removing the local face-to-face support from local councils when the Government moved to the online service.

## **Rejected**

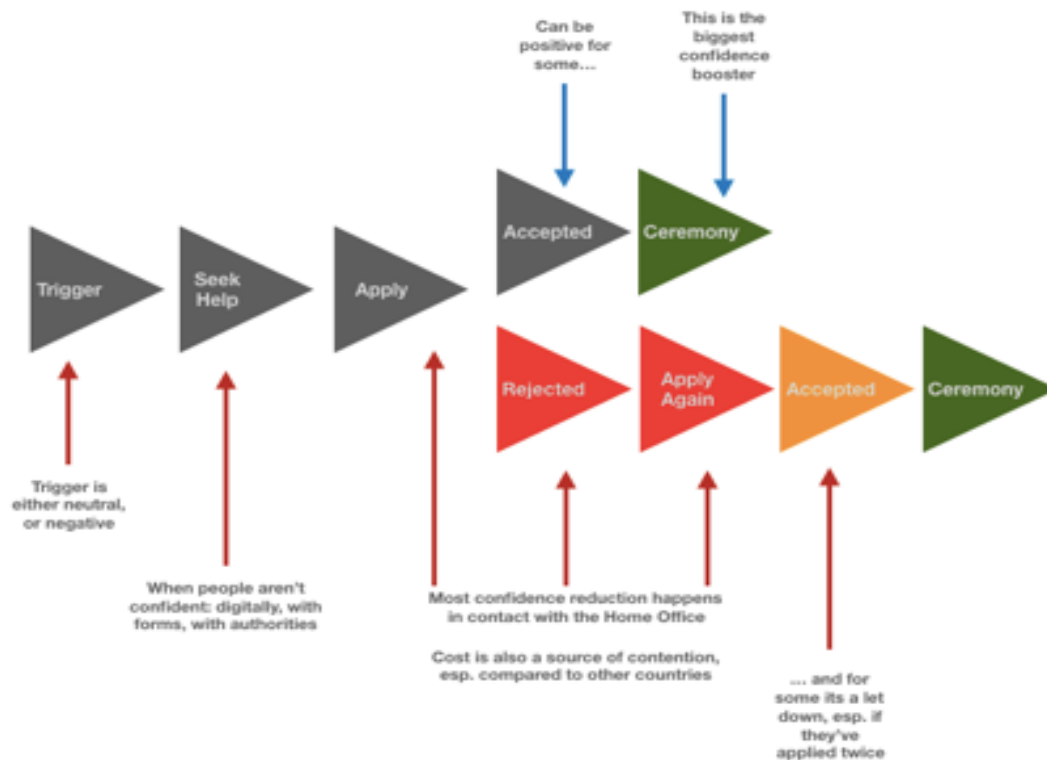
Whilst official figures suggest that less than 10% of applications are rejected, our interviews highlighted a number of stories of people who were eventually successful but whose first application for citizenship was rejected. Many of these people believed that this step has been purposely built into the process as part of a ‘hostile environment’ policy aim. Unsurprisingly this experience creates a large reduction in confidence, with people remarking that it *“makes me feel like I’m not welcome here”,* and *“demoralized – there was no reason given for my rejection.”*

## **Ceremony**

This step is liked by most citizenship applicants and is a strong boost of citizenship confidence for many. The ceremony is the single biggest event in the journey in terms of its positive emotional impact on citizen applicants, with comments including *“I was so proud I invited all my family and friends”* and *“I never realized how big a deal it was to get my citizenship, until the ceremony. That was a truly special moment.”*

## **Pain points summary**

The primary pain points for people are summarised in this diagram:



As shown by the diagram, most of the reduction in confidence comes in the middle stages of the process, which represents the biggest opportunity for improvement, especially in service design, where it appears more can be done to resolve issues on first contact, one of the key principles of Gov.uk digital transformation.

## Improving the Experience of Citizenship Application

In order to successfully use the tool of Customer Experience to achieve meaningful change, there are certain key success factors which need to be present, namely leadership, commitment to the process, and a willingness to embrace culture change.

### Leadership

Change within organisations can never be delivered entirely from the top down, but it is also highly unlikely to be achieved without the explicit permission and commitment of senior leaders. This is certainly true of implementing a Customer Experience approach to process such as citizenship applications. Civil Servants at any level act in relation to overarching policy goals, and the confluence or conflict between these policy goals will always become the environment within which particular processes and cultures are formed. Within the citizenship application process, there are two current overarching policy goals which we believe are shaping the process and culture. The first is that the Home Office sets visa, immigration and citizenship fees at a level that helps provide the resources necessary to operate the Border, Immigration and Citizenship (BIC) system. And the second is what was known as the Hostile Environment (now sometimes referred to as the Compliant Environment),



which sought to make life in the UK as difficult as possible for those who are not legally resident (but which of course has also affected others who were legally resident such as the Windrush Generation).

Without a clear new policy aim in regards to citizenship applications, any attempts to reform the process are likely to fail. Therefore, **we recommend that the Home Secretary makes a public commitment to making the citizenship application process as straightforward, accessible and positive an experience as possible**, as part of the Government's ongoing commitment to social integration. Such a commitment is the crucial first step in setting the tone and direction for a revised application process based on Customer Experience thinking.

## Commitment to the Process

The second key success factor in applying Customer Experience thinking effectively is commitment to the process. This means that **the Home Office must commit to a full and robust review of the citizenship application process based on Customer Experience principles**. The research conducted for this report was an 'outside-in' look at the process, which has highlighted a number of issues that need to be addressed. But this must be supplemented with an 'inside-out' review which builds on our mapping of the process and diagnosis of current customer experiences, and then goes on to elaborate a future desired state with ideal customer feedback as well as mapping current internal processes in order to identify the policies and procedures which need to change. Committing to this process means taking a comprehensive look at all aspects of the application journey, as well as ensuring that all relevant stakeholders are consulted and engaged. Ideally this process should be driven by senior leaders within the Home Office, but also making use of independent expertise and perspectives.

## Culture Change

An 'inside-out' review of the citizenship application process will undoubtedly highlight a number of practical elements that need to change. We would expect these to include recommended changes of language, changes to fee structures and waivers, and changes to documentation requirements. A review should also consider possible opportunities to provide accessible and free advice to people considering an application, as well as possibilities to build on the success of citizenship ceremonies.

Ultimately, however, **these practical changes need to be accompanied by a cultural change within the Home Office**. What is clear from our research is that too many citizenship applicants come out of the process with a negative view of the Home Office, even when their application has been successful. For this to change, there needs to be a wholehearted commitment to eradicating the perception of a 'hostile environment' culture from the citizenship application process, ensuring instead a consistent approach which builds confidence in prospective citizens at every stage of the journey.

## From Vision to Reality

Our research does not recommend a revolution in UK citizenship. We believe that taking a customer experience approach to citizenship seriously would make a significant difference for hundreds of thousands of people every year, setting them on a pathway to greater integration and thereby unlocking their potential contribution to the community and nation they have chosen to make home.



Putting this research into practice requires first a public articulation of a vision for citizenship application as part of the wider process of social integration that the Government has already committed to. This vision then needs to be put into practice through a thorough 'inside-out' review of the current citizenship application process and how it needs to change. And this review then needs to be enthusiastically implemented to drive the necessary cultural transformation, away from an attitude of hostility and suspicion and towards an attitude of welcome and assistance.

Our future compatriots deserve nothing less.