

Barriers and solutions to British citizenship

The cost of citizenship

How much does it cost to become British?

It costs £1,330¹ for an adult to obtain British citizenship by naturalisation. Most applicants have to pay additional costs, which include a £50 Life in the UK test, around £150² if the applicant has to do an English test to prove whether their knowledge of English is suitable for British citizenship, as well as travel expenses and provision of biometric information.³

The actual administrative cost for the Home Office to process the citizenship application is £372⁴. This means a substantial economic win on each application, and shows that the Home Office could reduce the cost to applicants at no burden to themselves.

How does this compare with citizenship in similar countries?

Comparing the cost of British naturalisation with sixteen other EU and non-EU countries of similar economic standing, as shown in Figure 1, reveals that the cost in the UK is notably higher than in other higher-income countries. The minimum cost of citizenship for individual adults ranges from approximately £10 to about £820⁵. For example, the cost of becoming a Dutch citizen by naturalisation currently is approximately £820⁶. This is £510 less than in the UK.⁷

We believe it is possible to compare the UK to the other countries because it has a similar cost of living index and purchasing power. Comparing the purchasing power of the UK to other countries' currencies shows that the UK has similar levels to France and New Zealand where the cost of citizenship is considerably lower than in the UK, as seen in Figure 2.

¹ See the UK Home office immigration and nationality fees: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/visa-regulations-revised-table/home-office-immigration-and-nationality-fees-2018>

² See, for instance, citizen advice guidance on citizenship for EU citizens: <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/immigration/applying-for-british-citizenship/deciding-on-citizenship-if-youre-from-the-eu/>

³ Children born to EU parents in the UK may have different routes to British citizenship. Some are born British, while others may qualify to register as a British citizen, rather than naturalise as a British citizen. Child citizenship is a very complex area of UK law and will be detailed in a future Young Europeans paper. This paper focuses on the cost of naturalisation, the process which most EU citizens who are now British citizens applied for so far.

⁴ See UK government visa fees transparency data: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/visa-fees-transparency-data>

⁵ By minimum cost, we mean cost of the application fee itself which requires other costs in some cases. Other costs, which may vary significantly for each applicant, are not included. These costs vary between individual applicants and between countries so they do not provide a good guide for comparing the minimum cost of citizenship between countries. Examples of such costs are language tests, citizenship tests, previous visas, professional advice or travel.

⁶ See Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service fees: https://ind.nl/en/Pages/Costs.aspx#Becoming_a_Dutch_citizen

⁷ These calculations were made in October 2020.

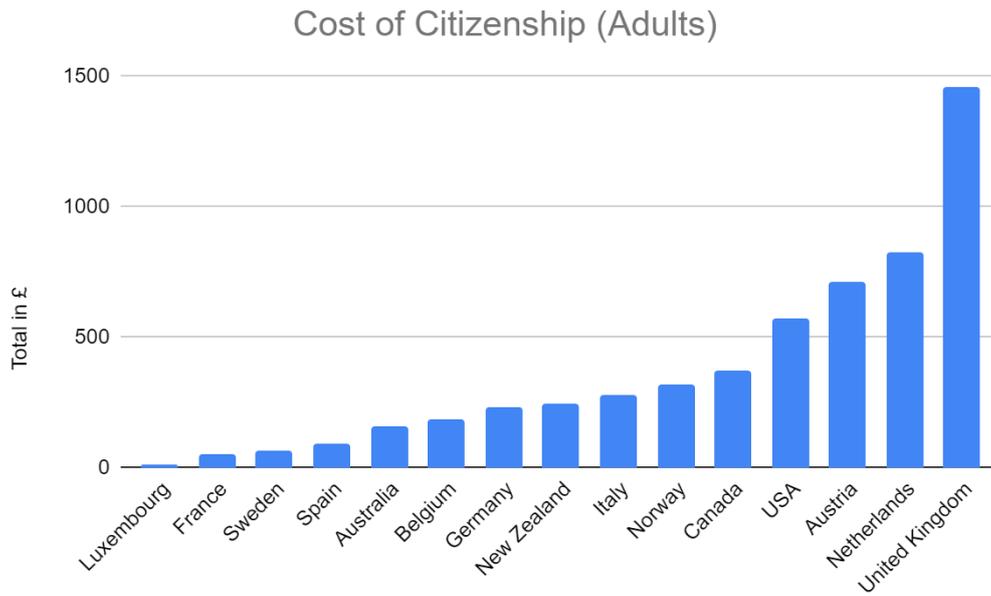


Figure 1: Comparison - cost of citizenship for adults (own illustration)

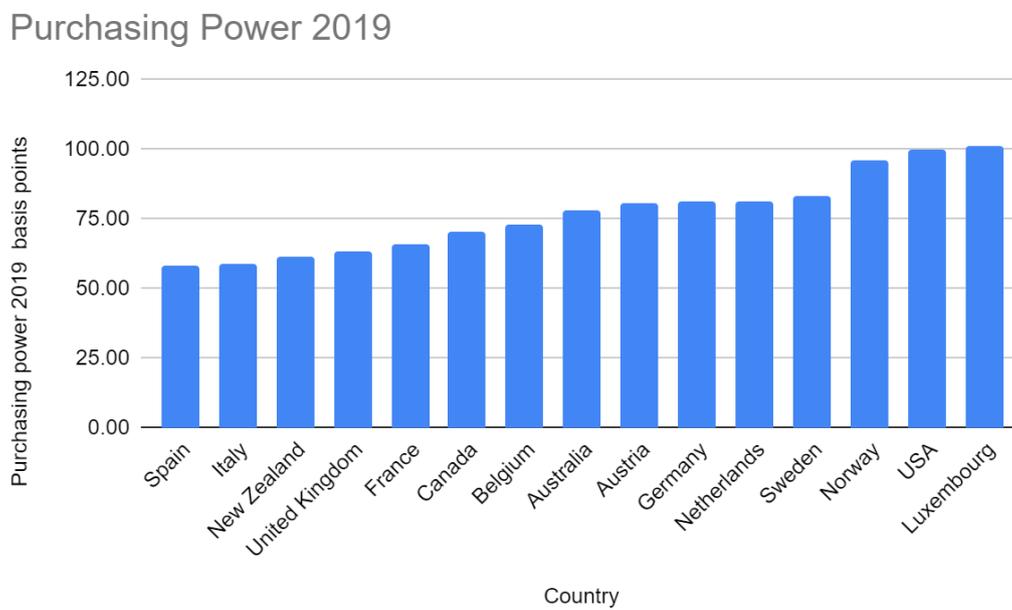


Figure 2: Comparison - purchasing power in 2019 (own illustration)

What does this mean for EU citizens in the UK?

The high cost of citizenship means that some individuals are priced out of applying for citizenship. This includes low-income households such as young Europeans still in education, recent graduates or individuals seeking employment (which is particularly difficult during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic), but also your average household.

For example, consider Joanna and Mario, an EU citizen couple who are living with Mario's retired EU citizen mother. The cost of citizenship for the household would be almost £4,000 in application fees alone, excluding the Life in the UK tests for adult applicants, the cost for additional documentation and travel expenses.

Considering that the average household annual disposable income (after tax and benefits) in the UK was £30,800⁸, the cost of applying to obtain British citizenship constitutes a significant expenditure of disposable income for an average household. This is money that the family may need for other critically important expenditures, including health care, food, housing, and education. This sizable amount of lost income might mean the family falls behind economically.

Citizenship fees are only one barrier of many that applicants face in the lengthy, expensive and legally complex process of British citizenship. Other barriers that applicants face include the Comprehensive Sickness Insurance⁹, limited absence requirements (a considerable hindrance during COVID-19 widespread lockdowns in the EU) and dual citizenship restrictions¹⁰, among other barriers.

If the requirements are not met, it is up to the Home Office to consider whether it is appropriate to exercise discretion in the applicant's favour. These parameters of discretion are not made clear to the applicant at the time of submitting their application. As the government does not provide a refund when the application is withdrawn or refused, applicants are put into a situation of uncertainty.

People seeking citizenship have to make a decision on whether to apply for citizenship (when the outcome is uncertain and there is the possibility of losing a substantial amount of money they may have saved for over a long period of time) or refrain from applying altogether, which unfortunately comes with its own set of risks, including the possibility of losing residence rights in the UK. But with costs so high, many will ask: "Why take the risk?"

⁸ See Office for National Statistics:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/householddisposableincomeandinequality/financialyearending2020provisional>

⁹ See our briefing which focuses on the CSI issue and our solutions: http://t3m.org.uk/t3m_CitizenshipBarriers

¹⁰ See our accompanying briefing on dual citizenship.

What are we asking for?

More than 4 million EU citizens have made the UK their home. They are welcomed by the British people and are well-integrated in society by becoming friends, neighbours, family and colleagues. EU citizens living in the UK often want to become British citizens and are prepared to participate in the citizenship application process and abide by the requirements set out by the Home Office.¹¹ However, there is a need for a vision and comprehensive strategy on citizenship that is more affordable and accessible for everyone.

Overall, the UK needs to ensure that everyone who wishes to become a naturalised British citizen has the resources necessary to navigate the citizenship application process. Fewer and less complex requirements are more likely to be understood and more prone to lead to successful applications for those who meet the eligibility requirements.¹² There could be, for instance, alternatives to the Life in the UK test for applicants to provide evidence of sufficient knowledge of and integration into British life. Non-UK citizens are actively involved in their communities, through volunteering or participating in public life. Evidence of that could be taken into consideration by the Home Office.

As shown in this briefing, the barriers compared with other similar countries are significantly higher (at least in terms of costs) and puts the UK in a less attractive position globally. Reducing barriers to citizenship will enhance Britain's ability to retain foreign talented workers for longer, creating a healthier economy, and ensure that Britain remains a global and diverse community.

The Home Secretary has the power to reduce and simplify existing barriers to citizenship and to create a more positive and fairer vision on UK citizenship. One that will enable new British citizens to thrive economically, socially, and educationally in their new home.

¹¹ See, for instance, our 2020 Young Europeans report, based on focus groups with 11 nationalities of young Europeans: <http://t3m.org.uk/YoungEuropeansReport>

¹² See our briefing which focuses on the CSI issue and our solutions: http://t3m.org.uk/t3m_CitizenshipBarriers