

Debate Pack

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Visas for international doctors

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Summary

A Westminster Hall debate has been scheduled for Wednesday 2 November on visas for international doctors, in the name of Matt Warman (Conservative).

The Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) is calling for a change to the visa conditions for international medical graduates (IMGs).

It argues that the existing rules do not reflect the unique circumstances of international graduates undertaking specialist training in general practice and are undermining efforts to recruit and retain GPs to work in the NHS. In particular:

- IMG GPs are not eligible to apply for permission to stay permanently until two years after completing their training, unlike people in specialities with longer training periods.
- To be eligible for a visa allowing them to stay after their training to work as a GP (and ultimately apply for permission to stay permanently), international GPs must find employment with a GP practice with a visa sponsor licence before their existing visa expires, but practical and bureaucratic obstacles can make it difficult to do so in practice.

The RCGP is calling on the Government to ease the requirements for IMG GPs, such as by allowing them to apply for permanent permission to stay at the end of their training period or extending their visas to allow more time to find a sponsoring employer. In the RCGP's view, the problems cannot be solved by providing support to GP trainees on visa issues and encouraging more GP practices to register as visa sponsors.

The Government's position

Recent Immigration Ministers have been unreceptive to calls for change.

They have suggested that the best way to retain international GP trainees is to increase the number of GP practices registered to sponsor visas.

They have also maintained that international GP trainees should complete five years' qualifying residence for indefinite leave to remain, in line with IMGs in other fields and other categories of skilled worker visa holders.

1 Background

1.1 International medical graduate visa requirements

People who have graduated from a medical school overseas can come to continue their training and work in the UK, subject to visa and other requirements. They are often referred to as “International Medical Graduates” (IMGs).

Medical training in the UK comprises of various stages:

- Initial study at medical school
- Foundation training
- Speciality training

IMGs who come to the UK to undertake speciality training may typically apply for a [Skilled Worker](#) or [Health and Care Worker](#) visa. Both visa categories require the person to be sponsored by a Home Office-approved licensed sponsor. The visas give temporary permission to stay in the UK and the possibility of applying for permission to stay permanently (“indefinite leave to remain”) after five years.

2 Visa issues affecting GP trainees

Stakeholders including the [Royal College of General Practitioners \(RCGP\)](#) [have raised concerns](#) that the visa sponsorship and qualifying residence requirements are uniquely challenging for IMGs training to be general practitioners (GPs) and are undermining efforts to recruit and retain IMG GP trainees.

According to RCGP data, 47% of new GP trainees in England in 2020/21 were IMGs.¹

The visa difficulties arise because GP training is a three-year programme, whereas training in other specialities takes at least five years. The practical consequences are that:

¹ RCGP, [RCGP submission to the Health and Social Care Select Committee Inquiry – Workforce: recruitment, training and retention in health and social care](#), p.4

- IMG GPs are not eligible to apply for permission to stay permanently until two years after completing their training, whereas people training in other specialities can typically apply immediately after their training.
- To be eligible for a visa to stay and work as a GP after their training (and ultimately apply for permission to stay permanently), international GPs must find employment with a GP practice with a licence to act as a visa sponsor before the visa linked to their training expires, but practical and bureaucratic obstacles can make it difficult to do so in practice.

A briefing by the RCGP explains the issue in more detail:

GP training is a three-year programme, during which time IMGs, ... are sponsored by their national training body (e.g. Health Education England). On completing training, they are required to find an employing practice which can act as sponsor. This can be a significant administrative challenge for all those involved. GPs can be left feeling undervalued or anxious about their future in the UK. Practices often do not have sponsorship licences in place, and struggle to secure licenses in the short time before visas expire.²

IMGs training for five years or more in other specialities do not face the same obstacles.

The RCGP has found that many GP trainees from overseas struggle to find NHS GP roles after their training with an employer licensed to sponsor their visas. Like some other small businesses, GP practices may struggle with the costs and bureaucracy associated with obtaining a licence to sponsor a foreign worker which other healthcare employers with more dedicated HR resources may be more able to manage.

The RCGP warns that the cumulative effect of the visa difficulties on IMG GP trainees is “some feeling forced to take roles elsewhere in the NHS and others considering leaving the NHS, and in some cases the UK, altogether”. [The RCGP’s survey of IMGs across the UK](#) found that around half of all respondents have difficulties with the visa process; around 30% of all IMG trainees consider not working as an NHS GP because of difficulties with the visa process; and 17% are considering leaving the UK entirely. It calculates that if those figures are representative, they would mean that there are 1,165 potential GPs in danger of not being available to NHS general practice.

In the RCGP’s view, the problems cannot be solved by “piecemeal” action such as providing support to GP trainees on visa issues and encouraging more GP practices to register as visa sponsors. It comments:

There are, however, 8,166 GP practices in the UK. For them all to become visa sponsors it will cost the NHS over £4 million. The process takes up to eight weeks and we have heard from some practices that it can take much longer. Most practices will only start the process when they know they have an IMG

² RCGP, [RCGP submission to the Health and Social Care Select Committee Inquiry – Workforce: recruitment, training and retention in health and social care](#)

they want to recruit. This wait can cause significant stress and anxiety for IMGs. Usually, an IMG needs a new, sponsored visa very soon after finishing their training, and this means there can be very tight timelines involved in completing the process of becoming a sponsor and subsequently the IMG applying for a visa.

(...) Encouraging more practices to become sponsors will help, but what we really need is action by the Home Office to completely remove the stress and anxiety that too many IMGs face.³

Speaking on the issue in May 2022, [Chair of the RCGP, Professor Martin Marshal, told the Guardian:](#)

At a time when general practice is experiencing the most severe workload pressures it has ever known, it is nonsensical that the NHS is going to the expense of training hundreds of GPs each year who then face potential deportation by the Home Office because of an entirely avoidable visa issue. We cannot afford to lose this expertise and willingness to work in the NHS, delivering care to patients, due to red tape.

2.1

Calls to ease visa requirements

The RCGP wants the Home Office to change the visa requirements for international medical graduates.

It [sent a letter to the then Home Secretary](#) Priti Patel in May 2022, calling for a change to the visa regulations international graduates were facing. It [wrote again to the Home Secretary](#), Suella Braverman, in October 2022, backed by over 4,000 GPs and GP trainees, restating their call for an urgent solution to the situation.

The RCGP has made three alternative proposals for change:

- **Allow international GP trainees to apply for indefinite leave to remain after successful completion of their GP speciality training.** The RCGP argues that this would create parity with international trainees working in secondary care and would encourage international GPs to continue to live and work in the UK after their GP training.
- **Create a new Post Medical Training visa**, similar to the existing Graduate visa, to enable trainees to remain in the UK for two years after training. This would give them more time to find an employer with a licence to sponsor international GPs.

³ RCGP, Fit for the Future, Opening the door to international GPs,

- **Work with the NHS bodies in each of the four nations of the UK to create umbrella bodies who can act as sponsors** for all international medical graduates.

3 Recent Parliamentary scrutiny

In July 2022, the Health and Social Care Committee recommended giving international GP trainees a “default visa extension for six months after the ... expected GP training completion date, to give them time to find an appropriate employer.”⁴

The Committee also called on the Home Office to work with the NHS to support GP practices to become licensed visa sponsors for international medical graduates and support the integration and retention of international GPs in the UK, including by easing restrictions on bringing immediate family members to the UK.

3.1 The Government’s response

Recent Immigration Ministers have been unreceptive to calls to ease the requirements for indefinite leave to remain for international GP trainees.

Earlier this month Tom Pursglove, then Minister for Immigration, reiterated the then Government’s view that international GP trainees should complete five years’ qualifying residence for indefinite leave to remain, in line with international medical graduates in other fields and other categories of skilled worker visa holders.⁵

Ministers have previously suggested that the “best way” to retain international GP trainees is to increase the number of GP practices registered to sponsor visas. They have confirmed that the Home Office and Department for Health and Social Care are working together on this issue:

[Owen Thompson, Scottish National Party, Midlothian](#)

To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, if she will make it her policy to change visa rules to make it easier for international GP trainees to stay and work in the UK.

[Kevin Foster, Conservative, Torbay](#)

⁴ Health and Social Care Committee, [Workforce: recruitment, training and retention in health and social care](#), HC 115, 25 July 2022, paras 74-5

⁵ [PQ UIN 59145](#), answered on 17 October 2022

Answered on 21 July 2022

The Home Office have already delivered a range of measures to support the health and care sector. The Home Office launched the Health & Care visa in 2020, which makes it easier, cheaper, and quicker for health workers, including GPs, to be recruited.

The Government will therefore not be amending its policy on international medical graduates (IMGs) who have completed their GP training. IMGs may use the time between the end of their training and the end of their visa to apply for work, and are eligible for the skilled worker route, which includes the Health and Care Visa.

We strongly encourage more GP surgeries to become Home Office approved sponsors, as this is the best way for the sector to retain international medical graduates as GPs, providing them with the ability to continue to renew their visa while living in the UK. Sponsorship is straightforward and business-friendly, the majority of sponsors on our register are SMEs, much like GP surgeries are likely to be. The Home Office and the Department for Health and Social Care are working together to increase the number of GP Practices registered as Home Office sponsors.⁶

The Government's formal response to the Health and Social Care Committee's report was due in late September but has not been published yet.

⁶ [PQ UIN 38735](#), answered on 21 July 2022

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