This article from **The Tablet** *highlights an important issue of justice*

Laura Harper - In giving, do we receive?

A fortnight ago , Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood signalled she may rethink plans to make it harder for foreign workers to claim permanent residence in the UK. For the national leader of L'Arche, this would be a welcome reprieve.

Sr Joan and Kirsty from L'Arche, Edinburgh

Andrew arrived from B for indefinite leave to remain. Their daughter, now 19, would go to university here. They would stop living from one visa renewal to the next and begin, at last, to feel secure. "We are settled here," Andrew says. "We already consider this home."

But since the government announced plans for an "earned settlement" framework last November, that future has been in doubt. Under the proposals, migrants who expected to qualify to remain after five years may instead wait 10 years or longer. For some, including those working in social care, it could stretch to 15.

For Andrew, the consequences are immediate and painful. If his family is forced to wait another decade before qualifying, his daughter may have to pay international student fees to attend university in the country she now calls home. On care worker salaries, that is impossible. "Our daughter has just finished school," Andrew explains. "How can she make plans, without knowing whether she can still be here in three years' time?" She is in a state of limbo, unable to plan beyond the next change in the rules. "Our lives are suspended."

It is tempting to treat this as a story about immigration. But after speaking to migrant support workers in L'Arche, what stands out for me is something else: what happens when a country asks people to care for its most vulnerable citizens, then tells them this is still not enough?

At L’Arche UK, we employ around 150 support staff - roughly a quarter of our staff on health and care worker visas. Many arrived during or after the pandemic. They came from India, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Botswana, South Africa and elsewhere. Many were trained in other fields teaching, economics, engineering, finance - but saw in Britain the chance for stability and security they could not find in their country of origin. We gathered testimonies from several of them to hear how they would be affected by the government's plans.

It is precisely that hope for security, for a life that can be planned, which is undermined in the current proposals. The harm is not simply administrative. It lies in the way trust is eroded when people who have reorganised their lives around one promise are told, years later, that the promise no longer stands. And in social care, the consequences do not stop with the workers themselves. They spread outwards to those who depend on them.

This is especially clear at L'Arche, where adults with learning disabilities share life alongside assistants who support them with personal care in daily life. It is practical work, but also deeply relational. A support worker is not just a name on a rota. They are often one of the very few people in someone's life with whom trust has been built slowly and patiently over time.

Members of L'Arche's National Speaking Council - representatives with learning dis-abilities - talk often about what staff turnover does to them. Again and again, they describe the pain of having to "start again". Many people with learning disabilities have small social worlds. Their closest relationships may be with family members and the workers who support them every day. When a support worker leaves, even for understandable reasons, it can lead to a traumatic sense of loss. Against that backdrop, one member of L'Arche, Kathy, expressed the contradiction clearly: if it is already so painful when support workers leave, why make it harder for those who want to stay?

The government's language of "contribution" offers no easy answer. Under the proposed framework - soon to be revised, we dearly hope - immigrants to Britain may be assessed according to salary level, whether they volunteer and how fully they are deemed to have integrated into British society. In theory, this may sound like a way of distinguishing between different kinds of contribution. In practice, it reveals how little value we attach to some of the work on which our common life actually depends.

Social care workers are low earners not because their work matters less, but because we have grown used to undervaluing care. The state then turns around and uses low pay as evidence of lesser contribution. This is a logic that compounds one injustice with another.

Several migrant assistants we spoke to were baffled by the suggestion that volunteering should form part of a route to settlement. One already volunteers through his local Anglican church, helping in the tech department and with children. But he was clear that turning voluntary service into a kind of immigration points system mis-understands the nature of volunteering. "Volunteering is supposed to be voluntary," he said. "If you are doing it to get something in return, it takes the whole meaning out of it. It becomes a means to an end."

More fundamentally, however, the new proposals fail to recognise the ways in which social care work is itself a form of civic contribution. It is work that involves long hours, emotional steadiness, practical flexibility - all on comparatively low wages. To imply that social care workers have not yet demonstrated enough civic commitment places another hurdle in front of people whose contribution to Britain is already visible every day.

Andrew sees this clearly. In the UK, both he and his wife now work at L'Arche. "We are paying our taxes," he said. "Our work is part of our contribution too. Looking at the pay that is associated with care work, that is why many people shun it. So, we are making our contribution by working in care.”

Moreover, the work of enabling people with learning disabilities to live lives of dignity and develop their gifts actually generates the kind of "integration" the government is looking for.

One of our assistants, Priscilla, came from South Africa in 2022 on a five-year skilled worker visa. Now working in one of our day activities programmes, she helps people take part in activities that develop new skills and draw out their creativity. She speaks movingly about one woman she supports, Donna, who loves recycling discarded materials and turning them into something beautiful. Recently, L'Arche organised a shop-window exhibition of Donna's work. Priscilla's role, as she sees it, is to help people like Donna recognise and develop their gifts. That is what care can be at its best.

Priscilla had previously worked as a secondary school teacher and came looking, in her words, for "a new challenge", the chance to "advance my career and be in the first world". But on starting in L'Arche, she quickly threw herself into community life. "I was so zealous," she told me. "I was intentional about working in all the houses, about getting to know everyone. I got to know people better and integrated into the community."

Priscilla's experience shows that integration simply cannot be measured by ticking boxes. It involves choosing to know people, building relationships across a community, working out how to contribute, finding out where one is useful, and discovering joy in helping others flourish. That whole picture is what makes sense of Priscilla's investment in this country.

But what should we make of that investment? A Nigerian father speaks of the extra expense he would face if he had to renew visas for himself, his wife and their little boy, who was born here but still has immigration status. He worried not about benefits, but about stability and a sense of belonging: wanting one day to avoid punishing inter-national fees if his son studies here. "I don't want to start again," he said. "I want to be settled." Another person asks how migrants could ever feel fully accepted if the conditions of belonging keep shifting.

These are not the anxieties of people trying to game the system, but of people who have made commitments, wondering whether this country is going to keep its commitments to them. For Fadzai, a 27-year-old from Zimbabwe, the deepest wound lies in blocked aspiration. Before coming to the UK in 2023, she had studied statistics and operations research and worked as a finance intern for an NGO focused on protecting women and children. She left her degree just one semester short of completion when the chance to come to Britain arose. Work at home felt pre-carious. Britain offered the possibility not only of employment, but of continuing her studies and building something more secure.

At first, Fadzai imagined qualifying for indefinite leave to remain and then resuming her studies. But social care changed her. The work itself began to matter to her. "Being a care and support worker makes me really happy," she says. Fadzai's experience deserves attention. Some discussion of migrant care workers assumes that they are only marking time until something better turns up. Certainly, many are ambitious, and many have qualifications or interests that extend beyond their current role. But it does not follow that they are indifferent to care or those being cared for.

In Fadzai's case, her experience of supporting adults with learning disabilities has deepened, rather than diminished, her sense of vocation. When she embarks again on her studies, as she hopes one day to do, it will be in the field of health sciences rather than abstract statistics, to grow further and offer more within a field she has come to love.

"I have always been interested in problem-solving," she tells us. "But in mathematics, you're using models based on assumptions rather than facts. When you're dealing with people, you're dealing with the reality of life. I don't want to further my studies in order to leave my job. I love it. But I do want to upgrade my job."

This seems to me one of the quiet absurdities of the cur-rent proposals. They are presented as a way of reward-ing greater contribution, ambition and integration. But for people like Fadzai, they postpone the very transition that would make greater contribution possible. A delayed route to settlement means delayed access to affordable study, delayed professional development, delayed ability to specialise, delayed capacity to earn more and do more.

"The earned settlement proposals have crushed my spirits," she admits. "It's demotivating. I set my personal goals based on what was promised. It has made me feel used. - like I've been lured into something with a promise that has now proved empty."

And yet, when questioned about the impact of the proposals, our assistants speak not only of themselves or their families, but of what will happen to those they support. "How will they feel when people who have supported them for five years are gone?" one man asked.

That, perhaps, is the question most absent from the wider debate. We discuss social care in terms of workforce planning, labour shortages and pressures on public spending. All of these matter. But behind them are human relationships: between a support worker and a person with learning disabilities who has finally learned to trust; between a migrant couple and the home they are trying to build; between a teacher from South Africa helping a woman discover that her art deserves to be seen.

Social care workers do not merely support the economy. They sustain the conditions of what Pope Leo calls our "magnificent humanity". The government says it wants migrants to demonstrate contribution. But some forms of contribution are not easily measured. They are found in quiet, daily acts: meals prepared, distress eased, trust built, lives steadied, grief gently carried. They are found in the work of helping another person flourish.

Britain invited many migrant workers into social care when the sector was in urgent need. We cannot now be surprised that they built lives here - joined churches, raised children, pursued qualifications, paid taxes, formed attachments - and hoped that this would be reason enough to stay.

Andrew is still going to work. So are Priscilla and Fadzai. They continue to support people, develop community and give of themselves, as care workers do every day. But now they are hoping the home secretary will soon prove that this country really means what it says when it speaks of contribution and belonging.

Priscilla, right, with Amy, at L'Arche London

This article was first published in *The Tablet*

Laura Harper is the national leader and director of L'Arche UK.