Indefinite Leave to Remain or British citizenship: which route suits your situation

Understanding your long-term options in the UK

For many people living in the UK on a visa, the question of permanent settlement eventually arises. Two main paths lead to a secure future here: Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) and British citizenship. Each offers different rights and responsibilities, and the right choice depends on your personal circumstances, plans and priorities. This article compares the two options so you can weigh what matters most to you.

What is Indefinite Leave to Remain?

Indefinite Leave to Remain, often called ILR or settlement, gives you the right to live and work in the UK without any time restrictions. You can stay indefinitely, take up employment or self-employment, and access public funds if you qualify. It is a significant step towards full integration into British society, but it is not the same as citizenship.

ILR does not grant you a British passport. You remain a citizen of your home country. You cannot vote in UK general elections, and you can lose your settled status if you leave the UK for a continuous period of two years or more. For many, ILR is a staging post on the way to citizenship, but for others it is the end goal.

What is British citizenship?

British citizenship, or naturalisation, is the final step. Once you become a British citizen, you gain the right to hold a UK passport, vote in all elections, and leave and re-enter the country freely. Your citizenship cannot be taken away simply because you live abroad for a long time. You also gain the ability to pass on your citizenship to children born outside the UK in some cases.

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The trade-off is that naturalisation requires a deeper commitment. You must demonstrate knowledge of life in the UK, meet English language requirements, and show that you meet the good character requirement. You also have to formally renounce any other citizenship if your home country does not allow dual nationality.

Key differences at a glance

The table below summarises the main differences between ILR and British citizenship. Use it as a quick reference, but remember that individual circumstances vary and professional advice is often needed.





- **Right to vote**, ILR holders cannot vote in UK general elections; British citizens can.
- **Travel freedom**, ILR holders can be absent from the UK for up to two years without losing status; British citizens can travel and live abroad indefinitely.
- **Passport**, ILR does not give you a British passport; citizenship does.
- **Deportation risk**, ILR holders can still be deported if they commit serious crimes; British citizens have stronger protection.
- **Dual nationality**, ILR does not affect your existing nationality; citizenship may require renunciation depending on your home country's laws.

When Indefinite Leave to Remain makes sense

ILR is often the right choice if you are not ready to commit to British citizenship, or if you want to keep your original passport without restrictions. It is also a necessary step before you can apply for citizenship, so you cannot skip it unless you are eligible through another route, such as UK ancestry.

People who plan to return to their home country permanently in the future may prefer ILR. Since you can lose ILR only after a long absence, it gives you a secure base in the UK without requiring you to cut ties with your country of origin. ILR also avoids the need to take the Life in the UK test and prove English language proficiency if you have already done so for your visa route, although these requirements still apply for some categories.

Another scenario where ILR suits is when you have not yet met the continuous residence requirements for citizenship. To naturalise, you normally need to have lived in the UK for at least five years, with no more than 450 days of absence in that period, and no more than 90 days in the last twelve months. If your absences exceed these limits, you may need to wait before applying for citizenship, but you can still obtain ILR.

When British citizenship is the better option

British citizenship is the right choice if you intend to stay in the UK for the long term and want full participation in society. The ability to vote, hold a British passport and travel freely is important for many people. Citizenship also gives you security against changes in immigration rules, which can affect ILR holders.

If you have children who were born in the UK, they may already be British citizens. Naturalising as a citizen yourself can simplify family life and ensure that your whole family shares the same status. It also makes it easier to sponsor family members for visas in the future.

For those who have lived in the UK for many years and feel settled, citizenship can be a natural step. It demonstrates a long-term commitment and offers peace of mind that your right to live here is not conditional on your immigration status.

The application process: what to expect

Applying for ILR or citizenship involves different forms, fees and documentary requirements. Both require you to show that you meet the relevant eligibility criteria, including residency, English language and knowledge of life in the UK.



For ILR, you typically apply using the SET(O) or SET(M) form, depending on your visa category. You must provide evidence of continuous residence, employment history, and any absences

from the UK. The Home Office checks that you have not broken immigration laws and that you meet the good character requirement.

For citizenship, the application is made using form AN. You must already hold ILR (or equivalent settled status) for at least twelve months before applying, unless you are married to a British citizen. You also need to pass the Life in the UK test and meet the English language requirement at B1 level or above. The good character requirement is stricter for citizenship, and the Home Office will look at your criminal record, tax compliance and any previous immigration breaches.

Common pitfalls and how to avoid them

One of the most common mistakes is underestimating the importance of the continuous residence requirement. Even short absences can affect your eligibility for citizenship, especially if they fall in the twelve months before your application. Keep a record of all your travel and ensure that your total absences do not exceed the limits.

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Another issue is failing to meet the English language requirement. Some applicants assume that because they speak English at work, they do not need to provide evidence. However, the Home Office requires a recognised qualification or proof that you have obtained a degree taught in English. Check the list of approved tests before you apply.

The good character requirement can also trip people up. Minor driving offences, unpaid fines, or a previous overstay can affect your application. If you have any concerns, it is wise to seek professional advice before submitting your forms.

How an immigration solicitor can help

Navigating the differences between ILR and citizenship can be complex, especially when your personal circumstances are unusual. An experienced immigration solicitor can assess your situation, explain which route is most appropriate, and help you prepare a strong application. They can also advise on how to handle any issues with absences, criminal records or previous refusals.

If you are based in London and looking for guidance on settlement or naturalisation, Adamir Immigration Solicitors London can provide tailored advice. Their team understands the nuances of UK immigration law and can help you understand your options. Whether you are applying for ILR or considering citizenship, having professional support can make the process smoother and reduce the risk of errors.



Making your decision

There is no single right answer for everyone. Your choice between ILR and British citizenship depends on your long-term plans, your ties to your home country, and your personal priorities. If you value the security of a British passport and full voting rights, citizenship is likely the

better path. If you want to keep your options open and avoid the extra requirements of naturalisation, ILR may be enough.

Whichever route you choose, make sure you understand the requirements fully before you apply. Mistakes can delay your application or lead to refusal, which can have serious consequences for your immigration status. Taking the time to prepare properly is an investment in your future.

For professional advice on your settlement or naturalisation options, you can contact Adamir Immigration Solicitors London at Unit-1, 5 Norman Rd, London N15 4ND, UK, or call +44 20 3302 0074.