

'MY LIFE WAS A NIGHTMARE'

The government taskforce created to atone for the Windrush scandal is beginning to help establish their right to live in the UK. But many others remain at risk, warn campaigners. In Black History Month, **Ciara Leeming** investigates the shameful hostile environment

When Winston Brown left Britain in 2006, he wore 48-inch trousers. After 13 years stranded in Jamaica, his waist size was just 28 inches.

During that time he slept rough, developed a clot in his leg and ended up living in a shed owned by a distant relative, at times having to sneak out under cover of darkness to steal vegetables from nearby gardens to survive.

"I was an Englishman who had my own business and drove a Mercedes back home and there I was struggling to survive," he says. "In Jamaica, if people know you are broke and have nothing for them they call you names. It was shameful – they dragged me down to nothing."

Winston, now 65, was returning from his aunt's funeral when he was refused permission to fly to Britain. It was the first time since arriving in Manchester to join his parents in 1971 that he had left the country. When he showed his Jamaican passport at the airport they found no record of UK residency and wouldn't let him on the plane. He was left with no money, few contacts and nowhere to go.

He spent years financially dependent on his sister back in Manchester, while she tried to persuade the authorities to let him come home.

It was only when the Windrush scandal hit the headlines last year that his family finally began making headway with his case. The Home Office Windrush Taskforce eventually returned him in March this year.

To add insult to injury, his Hulme barbershop – above which he also lived – was demolished while he was away. And he was arrested as he stepped off the flight as a warrant had been issued in relation to an outstanding court fine. Once back at his sister's overcrowded house, he came down with pneumonia

and was bedridden for four weeks. Winston has applied to the Windrush Compensation Scheme and is waiting for a response.

"I lost everything," he says. "My business, my home, my daughter, my grandkids. I had that shop for 16 years and had seven barber's chairs. All my gear has gone and I'm no longer fit for work."

"In Jamaica my life was like a nightmare. Everything there is money. People thought I must have been deported for some terrible crime because of the situation I was in and were calling me names and picking fights with me all the time. My health suffered and I was humiliated."

One of the activists supporting Winston has himself run into problems with the Home Office. Anthony Brown (no relation) was threatened with deportation

"I lost everything – my business, my home, my daughter, my grandkids. I had that shop for 16 years."

to Jamaica in 1983, three decades before the hostile environment policy was announced.

"They say the hostile environment started in 2014 but, believe me, it didn't," he says. "Each government would bring in more draconian laws to whittle away our rights. They brought in the killer with the 2014 Immigration Act. Now you have to prove your status to rent a house, get a job, go to the doctor's – everything basically."

Anthony moved to the UK as a six year old in 1967, with his mum and four siblings. They joined his father, who had been studying here, and settled in Trafford, Greater Manchester. Five years later his dad took up a lecturing job back in Jamaica. The three oldest children chose to stay behind but Anthony and one brother were taken back to Jamaica.

After leaving school he returned to Manchester, but ran into problems when he applied to study law at university. Unbeknown to Anthony, the 1971 Immigration Act had removed the right to reside in the UK from migrants who left the country for more than two years.

He says: "The university told me I was an overseas student. I checked this with the Home Office and they said yes, I had to either pay overseas fees or report to Manchester Airport to be deported. Obviously that was terrifying. My brother kept saying: 'You grew up here. How come I'm British and you're not?'"

"Your identity is shaped by who you have connections with and mine had been shaped by those formative experiences of living here as a child. For someone to come with an axe and say 'we're going to chop this', it didn't really compute."

The community rallied around Anthony and activists including Professor Gus John and Whit Stennett – who went on to become the first black mayor of Trafford – led a campaign in his defence. Eventually the government relented and he was given indefinite leave to remain.

As luck would have it, he was just finishing his law degree – taken through Open University three decades after being blown off course – when the Windrush scandal hit the news.

Under new rules aimed at targeting undocumented migrants, people from Commonwealth nations – including many who arrived as children – were being caught out if they lacked the papers to prove their status. In some cases,

Winston Brown Photo: Ciara Leeming

TMARE'



key evidence had been destroyed by government departments.

Some people lost jobs and housing and were refused healthcare, while others were detained or even deported back to countries they had not visited in years.

Together with several course-mates and volunteer lawyers, Anthony co-founded Windrush Defenders, a group that helps

“We need community groups talking to people to get the information across.”

people apply for their documents via the Windrush Taskforce scheme. Introduced by the government amid mounting public pressure, this temporarily waives application fees – normally around £1,500 – for those who qualify.

The group holds weekly surgeries at Moss Side’s Windrush Millennium Centre and guides people through the process of filling in the forms and collecting evidence. Similar groups have sprung up in cities across the country.

In April, the government agreed to pay up to £200 million in compensation to people wrongly classified as being here illegally who suffered as a result. Windrush Defenders volunteers have been helping people submit compensation claims – with no responses received so far.

They say many victims’ physical and mental health have been profoundly affected by their experiences, with many breaking down in tears during their sessions. In 16 months the group has helped dozens of people get their papers.

On 22 June 2018 – Windrush Day – Anthony himself applied for British citizenship, receiving it less than a month later. Only having indefinite leave to remain – which can be taken away if a person runs into trouble with the law – had always been a concern.

He says: “Believe me, there were lots of opportunities [for trouble]. As a black person you’re stopped often enough – and if any of those police stops went wrong you could be locked up and that could have been it. Even as an adult I had to always bear that in mind, especially as I got older and had a wife and children.

“People bury their heads in the sand. For years, people would ask me why didn’t I apply for a British passport? But I knew I’d written to the Home Office once and where did it get me? So you leave it.

“When I got my citizenship back after 35 years, it was a really empowering feeling and it made me feel very, very British. I thought, now they’ve given me the naturalisation certificate I’m going to do what British people do. I’m going to help as many people as possible and make sure this never happens again.”

Figures show almost 6,350 people had been granted documentation by the taskforce by July, with 4,680 of those being given citizenship and the rest indefinite leave to remain.

Windrush Defenders has worked with people from Africa and Asia as well as numerous Caribbean islands. The latest Windrush taskforce update reveals that

the successful applicants include people from France, Greece, Ireland and Brazil, among other places. Some EU migrants who have been settled in the UK for many years have used the scheme to get proof of their indefinite leave to remain.

The highest numbers came from Jamaica, which accounts for 2,150 people; India was next with 876 and Barbados then with 383.

In some cases, third, fourth and even fifth generation descendants of migrants are being affected by documentation problems.

Sekeena Muncey, her sister, their mum and their children all applied via the Windrush Taskforce scheme for proof of their status after the 34 year old was told they were not in fact British citizens.

Born in Preston, she had never left the country but when she applied for her teenage daughter’s first passport this year, it was refused. Because Muncey’s

white British father was not present at the registration of her birth, her nationality had followed her mother’s – which in turn affected her own children. Muncey’s mum was born on the Caribbean island of St Vincent and the Grenadines, moving to Britain aged seven in 1962, and was the only member of her family never to have naturalised.

Muncey, who went on to found the campaign group Preston Windrush Generation, says: “It’s like your identity is stripped away from you. You feel like you’re a nobody. When the Passport Office told me I should speak to the Windrush Taskforce I realised there’s bound to be lots of other people in this situation who don’t even know it. We are now trying to spread the message that people need to check their status.”

Anthony would like to see a concerted awareness raising campaign within the community. The Windrush scheme will not be around forever, he warns, so people should use the opportunity while it is available.

“We need community groups to be talking to people one on one to really get the information across,” he says. “There’s a perception that it only affects older people but that isn’t the reality. This affects all generations. It can be when kids want to travel abroad or something when they meet these problems. Lots of people don’t realise it even affects them, so it’s a ticking time bomb.” ■

Calls to fund Windrush defenders

A network of grassroots support groups is bidding for a Home Office contract to work with those affected by the Windrush scandal.

Voluntary groups in Manchester and Preston are among those hoping to win government funding to guide affected people through the process of applying for compensation.

The Windrush Compensation Scheme tender closed on 30 September and the chosen service provider is expected to be up and running by January.

Lawyers and activists from the Manchester group Windrush Defenders set up a community interest company and joined forces with Preston Windrush Generation and others to put together a bid. At present group members are offering support unpaid, on top of their work and family commitments, but if they win they could employ staff to support people full time.

The compensation scheme is limited to two years and is due to end in spring 2021.

Anthony Brown, of Windrush Defenders, said: “We know what it’s like – because we don’t have the infrastructure, some other organisation is likely to get it but they won’t have the empathy or the community knowledge.

“We don’t have the confidence that people will get the support they need if this happens, so we formed a community interest company to tender for the work. We have partner groups in London, Nottingham, Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool and Preston and would triage cases to them.

“Just as people rallied around and helped me with my own case in the 1980s, I’m doing the same thing but on a national basis.”

Glenda Andrew, of Preston Windrush Generation, which is taking referrals from the local Citizens Advice Bureau, added: “Some people need to be compensated because their lives have been brutally affected by this scandal.

“We can go to people’s houses and help them with the documents – it is private, confidential and independent. But it is time consuming and we don’t get paid for this. If we win the tender we will be able to help more people.”