



Chi Onwurah MP Chair APPG for Africa
Patrick Grady MP Chair APPG for Malawi

BY EMAIL

16 November 2020

Dear Chi and Patrick,

DEPARTMENTAL RESPONSE TO APPGs REPORT ON VISA PROBLEMS FOR AFRICAN VISITORS TO THE UK

I am writing to you in your capacities as Chair of the APPGs for Africa and Malawi respectively, in response to report Visa Problems for African Visitors to the UK which was published in July 2019 by the APPG for Africa, the APPG for Malawi and the former APPG for Diaspora, Development & Migration.

I understand this report is the culmination of considerable research and evidence gathering., I am aware whilst attending the launch, Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP, the then Minister of State for Immigration, thanked the APPGs for the report and acknowledged the importance for the Government to receive feedback from stakeholders in order to understand where the system may need to be improved.

I would like to apologise for the delay in the Home Office providing a substantive response to the recommendations contained in the report. Further to your correspondence of 10 February, I look forward to constructive engagement with you on the operation of our visa services in Africa and would welcome your written views on this response. We recognise the importance of the visa system being accessible to, and transparent for our customers, and are continuously looking for ways to improve our service. I am also copying this correspondence and the response to my Right Honourable friend, James Duddridge, as the Minister of State for Africa in the FCDO.

I have set out in the enclosed Appendix the Department's official response to the eight recommendations made by the report. United Kingdom Visa and Immigration (UKVI) officials have considered each recommendation and set out a formal response against each one, although there are some areas of overlap and interdependency.

In addition to this, I thought it would be helpful to share with you my wider views on some of the observations contained in the report in respect of the visa decision-making process and our visa services in Africa.

Firstly, it is worth highlighting some of the progress we have made in both areas of UKVI's decision-making and its customer service since the report was been published.

In May 2019 UKVI issued new guidance to decision makers, reminding staff to ensure due consideration is given to sponsorship, particularly with regard to organised events. UKVI have received positive feedback from external partners on the impact of this guidance and their work on

preparing for key events. As you may be aware earlier this year, the UK hosted the UK-Africa Investment Summit and UKVI played a crucial role in ensuring the smooth and successful attendance at the Summit of the country delegations.

On the customer service side, since early 2020 all customers globally, including in Africa, have had the option of digitally submitting their supporting evidence themselves free of charge. This means where this happens in our customer journey, supporting documentation is no longer sent across borders as set out in your report. In addition to this, the Department has recently agreed a 50% reduction in fees all customers based overseas will pay when contacting our commercial partner contact centres for queries about visa applications.

It is also important when examining how our visa system works to look at the scale of the operations and to highlight the statistics on visas granted to African nationals. UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) received 2.8 million applications for visitor visas in the year 2019, of which 2.4 million were granted. This is an 8% increase compared with the previous year, to the highest level on record and continues the upward trend seen over the last decade. We do though expect to see a significant drop off in demand this year due to the impact of global travel restrictions.

UKVI's global service standard for processing a visit visa application is 15 working days and in 2019 96% of applications were processed within this target. Visa applications from Africans were at their highest level since 2006 and the number of visit visa applicants from Africa granted visas in 2019 was 338,815. A year on year increase of almost 14%. There was also a notable increase, up 22,161 (33%) to 89,433, in visitor visas granted to Nigerian nationals. In total, 420,765 visas of all types were granted to applicants from Africa in 2019, an increase of over 32% on the year 2016.

I note the report makes mention of concerns from visa applicants about *“undisclosed quotas for rejection or for the numbers of visas granted in a fixed period”*.

UKVI does not operate any such quotas and I hope the figures above help address those concerns. All non-EEA visitors to the UK are assessed against the same immigration rules regardless of nationality and whether there is a visa requirement. The only difference is whether this assessment is made at the UK border or by a decision maker assessing a visa application. All UK visa applications are considered on their individual merits. The onus is on the applicant to demonstrate they satisfy the immigration rules regardless of their nationality.

The report also makes mention of concerns about the lack of a right of appeal and the apparent absence of oversight are seen to undermine the fairness of the system. Decisions to refuse visit visa applications do not attract the right to an appeal or an administrative review. Many decisions are reviewed by Entry Clearance Managers, including all decisions where the refusal is based on the submission of false documents or statements. Following a decision to refuse a visit visa application, if the applicant considers they can satisfactorily address the reasons for refusal, the appropriate course of action will ordinarily be to submit a fresh application. In cases where it is brought to the attention of UKVI staff there has been an error in the decision-making process, there exist exceptional compelling or compassionate circumstances or other external factors not detailed in the original application, a Decision-Making Centre (DMC) may agree to review a decision outside of the standard process.

Finally, the report correctly points out that *“The UK is in the process of developing a new migration policy post-Brexit that will need to balance the need for migration at a range of skills levels, the capacity of local areas to receive migrants, and the requests for improved visa access for nationals of countries with which the UK seeks to sign trade and other agreements.”* and the report asks that *“Visitor visas for Africans, as for all nationalities, should form part of this wider policy review, for which the recommendations in this report need to be taken into account.”*

UKVI is committed to making the process of applying for a visa, for those who are required to do so, as simple and straightforward as possible. We will build on the work of the EU Settlement Scheme which in October this year received its 4 millionth applicant; and which implemented cutting edge technology enabling applicants to apply from the comfort of their own home and providing them with a secure, digital status. We are carefully considering a range of options for the Future Border and Immigration System and we are engaging with the industry as technology develops. We want to ensure any decisions on the long-term process and processing arrangements for visa applicants are based on evidence and engagement. This report is being taken into account as part of that evidence.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Foster', with a large flourish at the end.

Kevin Foster MP
Minister for Future Borders and Immigration