

**Joint APPG report launch: Visa Problems for African Visitors to the UK
On Tuesday 16th July from 4.45pm until 6.15pm in the CPA Room, House of Commons**

Chair: Chi Onwurah MP, Chair of the APPG for Africa

Panel Members:

- 1) Patrick Grady MP, Chair of the APPG for Malawi
- 2) Rt. Hon. Caroline Nokes MP, Minister for Immigration
- 3) John Vine, Former Independent Chief Inspector for Borders & Immigration
- 4) Dr. Robtel Neajai Pailey, Liberian Academic, Author and Activist

Parliamentarian Attendees:

Lord Oates, Lord Chidgey, Lord Steel, Liz McInnes MP, Jeremy Lefroy MP, Mathew Pennycook MP, Patrick Grady MP, Chi Onwurah MP

Event Summary

Chi Onwurah MP, Chair of APPG for Africa opened the event by thanking the audience for attending the launch. She also thanked the organisers of the event, The Royal African Society, Henrietta Bailey of All Party Parliamentary Group for Africa, All Party Parliamentary Group for Malawi,

Patrick Grady MP, Chair of the APPG for Malawi then went on to give a summary of the report highlighting that according to Home Office statistics, African applicants are over twice as likely to be refused a visa than applicants from anywhere else in the world, understaffing and under-resourcing of entry clearance officers and a culture of refusals perpetuated by a lack of quality control, oversight or right of appeal. He said the report found decision making to be inconsistent and discriminatory with applicant's often refused for not providing evidence they were not required to submit. He then pointed out that there is no single issue that does more damage to the image and influence of the UK than the visa question.

He said stopping people from coming to the UK affects the economy, society and culture as well. He said it is in the UK's national interests, or at least it ought to be in the national interest level, to bring people together

Patrick concluded by calling for various select committees, namely the Home Affairs Select Committee to carry out their own inquiry into the issue and take forward the recommendations provided in the report.

Rt. Hon. Caroline Nokes MP, Minister for Immigration

The Minister said she welcomed the challenge given to her by the APPG groups involved in the preparing and the launching of the report.

She pointed out that last year, the UK welcomed over 2.3 million visitors who came for leisure, study and businesses which was an 8% increase from the previous year.

Meeting memo

She admitted that everything is not perfect. She recognised, for instance, long distances that some African applicants are expected to travel in order to get to a visa application centre. Some of these pop up visa application centres open only one day a month.

She, however, stressed the fact that the government has to be prudent with the way it spends taxpayers' money, but also look at where the demand lies. Therefore, the government is often mindful of the cost involved in setting up visa offices and the security that's necessary for the location the offices are.

She said the UK welcomes genuine visitors from Africa and that she was very conscious of the significant contribution visitors make to the economy and to universities as well. She also recognised the importance of attracting young people to come and study here in terms of soft power.

The Minister acknowledged that the vast majority of people who are granted a visa leave on time. She said the government needs to have a proper grown up relationship with sponsors, and with individuals so that they always way up the balance of probabilities and risk and understand how to best deliver what we all want to achieve.

"I want us to be a Britain that is open for business because it attracts global talent that attracts global businesses. I recognise that in order to do that, we have to be forward thinking about how we address the border, and how we're going to respond to people's visa applications"

She concluded by saying that since the launching of this inquiry, she has noticed a real willingness from officials within the Home Office and from individual decision makers to try to understand the visa issues within the report and to make better decisions.

She promised to respond to all challenges raised in the report, adding that the challenges deserve full response.

Question 1

Mathew Pennycook MP asked why the Home Office would not consider previous visits by applicants who've been in the UK previously with sponsor organisation covering their costs and left in a timely manner. When visas are refused there is no transparency about the reasons for the refusal and no right of appeal. As such, he pointed out that many applicants have lost faith in the application process

Question 2

Nick Farley, Director of the Edinburgh International Book Festival asked whether the Minister has got any practical suggestions about what festival organisers could do to make it easier for them to secure visa for this year's festival

Question 3

This audience member gave a details account of how on several occasions her close relatives were denied visa and failed to attend important family events such as her wedding.

Meeting memo

She also told the minister of her close relative who was wrongfully accused of forging application documents.

Minister Responds

The Minister asked her assistants to speak to the audience member and get more details about her case(s). She particularly pointed out that she takes forgery allegations seriously.

She went on to say how hard she finds hearing visa applicants denied visas to attend important family events. She said she is keen to discuss with her colleagues on where they've gone wrong and how they could improve.

With regards to the Edinburgh book festival, the Minister advised the organisers to keep up the relationship with the decision makers. She also advised Nick and other organisers to apply as early as they can so as to give decision makers maximum time to consider the applications.

For big events, festivals, academic conferences, church events which happen on yearly basis, she advised the organisers to let the Home Office know early on that the events are happening so that they can make sure that they are able to engage better.

John Vine - former Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration

John Vine started by pointing out that for over 10 years, the Home Office has been receiving regular stream of reports from the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) that contain key recommendations for improvements in almost every aspect of borders and immigration in general, with some recommendations telling the Home Office specifically what to do to address some of the issues raised.

John referred to the study on visa posts in Africa he conducted back in 2011. Among other things, he said the reports talked about the consistency of decision making, the staffing levels being unequipped to deal with the volumes of visa applications and the resources required for managers to their job effectively and efficiently. All things found in the APPG report also.

He concluded by saying that the Home Office needs to go back, look at the reports and implement the recommendations provided in the reports instead of accepting some of the recommendations and then ignoring them by not implementing any changes. He said what's happening is the reiteration of the recommendations which have been provided in many reports of the ICIBI for many years.

Dr. Robtel Neajai Pailey, Liberian Academic, Author and Activist

Dr Robtel Neajai Pailey started by sharing her own experiences of applying for the UK visas, both from Ghana, as a Liberian National and from the United States as an American permanent resident. She said the difference in the experiences were like "day and night". She said while applying from Africa was complicated and difficult, applying from the US as a resident was straight forward and fast.

Robtel said she would like to know the amount of revenue the UK makes from visa applicants from Africa. She said this would help to make sense of how much does the UK stand to lose if African applicants decide to boycott applying for UK visas.

She criticised a paragraph in the report for using the term 'illegal immigrants'. She said as a scholar and as someone who grew up as an undocumented migrant in the United States "*there's no such thing as an illegal human being*"¹.

For policy change, Robtel asked the Home Office to require African applicants to apply for processing of visas, not visas themselves. She argued that if Africans are disproportionately being refused visas, they are effectively paying for services that they are not getting. She recommended for recourse where African applicants pay half of the visa application fee and then once they have the visa in their passport, they could then pay the balance.

Chi Onwurah MP pointed out that France's policy was that all Africans who studied in France are granted unlimited visa entry to the country. It is not the right to live in France permanently but that they will always have their visa applications accepted without charge.

Patrick Grady MP encouraged people to get their local Member of Parliament involved in the visa application process of their visitors. Anytime. He said this might help cutting through the red tape. But secondly, he believed this will increase the evidence base, and increase the pressure on the Ministers.

He added that the more correspondence Ministers get and the more questions they get asked about it in the Chamber, the more likely that a policy change will happen.

Chi Onwurah MP concluded the event by thanking the attendees and those who contributed in the discussion. She also thanked the MPs who attended the panel and other meetings during the inquiry. She thanked the people who worked on the research and writing of the report and the event to launch it.

She appreciated the fact the room was filled with many diverse representatives of the British culture and society.

Chi said the visa problem is an issue that cannot be allowed to continue. She said the issue affects the country's soft power but most importantly the economy and the collaboration with the Africa continent.

Chi said visa problem is a big issue for the UK's core values as a country, and that the UK's values of openness, fairness and diversity are being undermined by the current situation and that it is up to everyone to put an end to that.

¹ *The writers of the report are grateful to Dr Pailey for highlighting this error and this oversight has since been rectified in the digital copy of the report.*