

The Independent Monitor for Entry Clearance



Report on my visit to Amman and Dubai: January 2008

Background information: Amman

- **Application processes:** Applications are lodged at a Visa Application Centre run by Worldbridge, UKvisas' commercial partner. The VAC takes biometric data and forwards the application form and supporting documents to the British Embassy. Amman is the designated post for Iraqi and Syrian applicants as well as for Jordanians.
- **Demand:** In financial year 2006-07, Amman received 16,910 UK applications a decrease of 1.5% over the previous year. In the current financial year to October, there has been a further decrease of 4.5%. 58% of applications are for non-family visits and 8% are from people wishing to study in the UK.
- **Refusal Rates:** In 2006-07, the overall refusal rate was 21%, rising to 30% so far this year. I found that visit visa applications (excluding children) for October to December had a refusal rate of 16% and all non-settlement applications had an overall refusal rate of 23%.
- **Staffing:** UKvisas' briefing said that there is 1 Entry Clearance Manager and 3.5 Entry Clearance Officers. At the time of my visit, there was a fourth, temporary Officer. There is a regional risk assessment officer and a complement of administrative support staff.
- **Surplus and Deficit:** In 2005-06, the most recent figures available, the visa operation was in deficit by £536,597.

Background information: Dubai

- **Application processes:** Applications are lodged at a Visa Application Centre run by VFS, UKvisas' commercial partner. The VAC takes biometric data and forwards the application form and supporting documents to the British Embassy.
- **Demand:** In financial year 2006-07, Dubai received 49,174 UK applications a significant increase of 27% over the previous year. In the current financial year to November there has been a decrease of 6.1%. 79.9% of applications are for non-family visits and 3.6% are from people wishing to study in the UK.
- **Refusal Rates:** In 2006-07, the overall refusal rate was 12.8%, rising to 15.9% so far this year. I found that visit visa applications (excluding children) for October to December had a refusal rate of 18% and non-settlement applications had an overall refusal rate of 17%.
- **Staffing:** UKvisas' briefing said that there is 60% of an Entry Clearance Manager (a full time, spending 40% of his time in Abu Dhabi) and 3 Entry Clearance Officers, plus seasonal relief staff and administrative support. The regional risk assessment officer is based in Dubai.
- **Surplus and Deficit:** In 2005-06, the most recent figures available, the visa operation recorded a surplus of £1,111,692.

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The programme

In both Posts I talked with Entry Clearance Officers and Managers, risk assessment staff, airline liaison officers and the British Council. I visited the Visa Application Centres. In Amman, I met visa staff from the American and Australian Embassies. In Dubai I met the VisitBritain representative along with Embassy staff with responsibilities for Britain's political and commercial links with Dubai.

Information

Websites: I thought that the **Worldbridge**, website in **Amman** was well presented and it was good to see the quick links direct to UKvisas own information. I was, however, concerned to see that despite making recommendations in the past, there are still references to Visa Fees, rather than to Visa Application Fees. Making it clear at every opportunity that the fee covers handling and considering the application, rather than the visa, should reduce demands for the fee to be refunded when an application is not successful.

Following website directions, I tried to make an appointment, but the earliest date given was two weeks away and even then the system would not allow me to book. I sent an email query/complaint and although it was acknowledged promptly, the response was "*Bu mail bir sanal mail adresidir. Herhangi bir kisi tarafindan kontrol edilmediginden size cevap yazilmayacaktır. Please not reply this mail*". I fail to understand why the response was mostly in Turkish. Some 5 days later I received a further email to say "*There is no need to schedule an appointment to apply at th VAC Amman*". This is wholly unsatisfactory, and even more so when it appeared that VAC staff did not know that the system had failed. **I recommend** that UKvisas investigates both the website failure, and the inadequate email responses. I can fully understand why the British Embassy has continued to get high volumes of enquiries if my experience is typical. I made some minor recommendations with regard to the British Embassy website and all were accepted and acted upon straightaway.

UKvisas' response

UKvisas and its commercial partner in Jordan, CSC-WorldBridge, agree that the response to the Independent Monitor's e-mail enquiry was not acceptable. WorldBridge was experiencing technical problems with the Visa Appointment Booking System (VABS) in Jordan when the enquiry was submitted. The enquiry was escalated to WorldBridge's Knowledge Management Centre in the US for a response, since the Istanbul call centre which handles enquiries for Jordan was not aware of the technical problem with the Visa Appointment System. The technical issues were resolved on 23 January and no further problems have been reported by customers.

WorldBridge aims to reply to all e-mail enquiries within a maximum of 3 working days, in accordance with its Service Level Agreements. WorldBridge is now working to improve the efficiency of its enquiry response systems. An improved e-mail handling system is due to be introduced in March 2008.

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Visa Application Centres:

I thought that the VFS website in **Dubai** was well presented with easy to read practical information and direct links to UKvisas for wider policy guidance. For those who try the British Embassy website first, I thought it would benefit from a more obvious link to visa information, rather than the enquirer having to navigate their way through a button marked Services. I noted that using a search engine took me to out of date pages on the British Embassy Abu Dhabi site and **recommended** that these are deleted.

UKvisas' response

UKvisas welcomes the IM's feedback on the VFS website. The ECM has carried out a thorough review of the visa-related pages of the Embassy website. It will be updated and improved in line with the recommendation by 4 March 2008.

Following VFS website directions, I emailed to make an appointment. It was acknowledged promptly, "*Kindly provide us with the exact time, date, contact number (mobile) along with the passport number so as to fix an appointment and we will revert back to you. Appointment time is from 9:00 am to 4:00pm*". I thought that was a promising and efficient start.

Visa Application Centres:

Amman: I was concerned that the external signs at the newly opened Visa Application Centre had no indication that Worldbridge is UKvisas' official partner. That may not be a problem in Amman, but in countries where other agents try to give the impression they are "official", there is the need to demonstrate the real partner's status. **I recommend** that UKvisas issues appropriate guidance. In Amman, there might be problems amending the fascia sign but there are smaller freestanding notice boards that could include UKvisas logo and **I recommended** they should. Once inside, I saw that further thought needed to be given to establishing a smooth path for the applicant to go through and I understand that work on that is already underway. I thought that VAC staff were attentive to customers and that first impressions of the application process were generally good with pleasant waiting areas, writing spaces and a stack of magazines.

UKvisas' response

UKvisas agrees that wherever possible the official status of its commercial partners should be demonstrated through appropriate signage and will issue guidance within 3 months. However external notices need to reflect the local security situation, as agreed between UKvisas and its partner. In some countries it is not appropriate for the UKvisas' logo to be displayed, for security reasons. At the Amman Visa Application Centre all relevant notices have been amended.

I did have serious concerns that information on UK law and UK government policies was on notices with a Worldbridge heading. Information on such matters must be clearly headed to show who makes the rules and **I recommend** that notices on fees, the non-returnability of fees, what documents were required and the warning about non-genuine documents should be re-printed with UK visas logo. It is important that a commercial partner does not give the slightest impression that they set the application fee, or that they decide that an application will not be

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granted if documents are found to be non-genuine. **I recommend** that UKvisas issue the necessary directions.

UKvisas' response:

UKvisas accepts these recommendations. All notices have been amended accordingly and UKvisas will remind both Commercial Partners of the importance of both these points.

Dubai: The VAC is located in offices off an up-market shopping mall: very appropriate for Dubai and a far nicer location than having to queue at the Embassy. The overall impression was excellent with a light and airy room, smartly presented information, courteous staff and a fast moving process.

Whilst Worldbridge and VFS printed material was of generally high quality, I noted that information on passport validity had not been corrected following UKvisas' direction of November 2007. There is no requirement for a passport to be valid for more than six months, though I shall be making a recommendation in that regard in my forthcoming Parliamentary Report. In the meantime, **I recommend** that UKvisas reminds Post and partners that information needs to be corrected and not just the application form.

UKvisas' response

This was rectified immediately by VFS. Posts are to be reminded of this requirement in the next edition of ReView to be published on 29 February 2008.

British Council

I had useful meetings with British Council staff discussing changes in the way student applications will be determined. In Amman, I noted the need for training and information, which visa staff were keen to offer. In Dubai, I noted a potential problem for Emirate applicants in that currently they are "excused" from fully completing the Visa Application Form and not required to provide supporting documents: that will not be possible once the Points Based System starts.

Decision quality file samples

Amman: I reviewed 51 files where visas had been refused, in early December 2007, with information on limited appeal rights. 10 further cases were not within my remit and I asked UKvisas to provide guidance on appeal rights for settlement applications refused on the grounds of non-genuine documents. Compared with the most recent global file sample, using a 10 point quality scale, Refusal Notices scored an overall 76%, placing Amman in the **Fair** band (global average =83%, regional average = 70%).

18% (global 5%) of Refusal Notices were not in accord with the **Immigration Rules**. Child visit applications were, with a few exceptions, being refused under Rule 41 without considering Rule 46A. As I have noted in the past, Rule 46A (iii) provides a simple reason for refusal which emphasises child protection "Your parents' [insert names] visa applications have been refused and I am not satisfied that you can demonstrate that suitable arrangements have been made for

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your travel to and care in the United Kingdom”. It takes less time to do that than copying and pasting text, or inserting a series of reference numbers into a joint Notice.

I noted that the section summarising the **evidence** that the Entry Clearance Officer had taken into account contained no detail and where there had been an interview, this fact was omitted. **I recommended** that the evidence section needed to be applicant specific and the team thought that the case management system would allow that to be achieved simply and quickly. UKvisas accepted my July 2006 recommendation that a Refusal Notice should include sufficient difference and detail to demonstrate that the applicant’s case has been considered on its own merits. There was applicant specific **evidence** in only 77% of Refusal Notices compared with 93% globally. I also noted a tendency to make statements without linking them to an Immigration Rule or reason for refusal. There was evidence of good practice and I noted in particular consistently sound handling by all staff of an applicant’s previous travel and immigration history.

UKvisas’ response

UKvisas accepts this recommendation and Post will ensure that best practice is shared.

I noted that only 4% of Refusal Notices referred to **verification and risk related evidence**. The regional Risk Assessment Manager took up the role last month and will, I am sure, be developing this increasingly important area of support.

Finally, I had concerns about the wording of some Refusal Notices relating to Iraqi nationals. I find it inappropriate to quote a journalist’s report when outlining the difficult circumstances in Iraq and the proportion of Iraqis who wish to settle elsewhere, even if the journalist is commenting on an official and well regarded report. Quoting from a report is, however, a different matter. One Entry Clearance Officer handled this issue with care and sensitivity and, with a little updating of the source material quoted, I commended the wording as good practice.

Dubai: I reviewed 50 files where visas had been refused, in early December 2007, with information on limited appeal rights. Compared with the most recent global file sample, using a 10 point quality scale, Refusal Notices scored an overall 74%, placing Dubai in the **Fair** band (global average =83%, regional average = 80%).

One further case should have been notified of full appeal rights, being a qualifying family visit; I thought that the Entry Clearance Officer had not read the sponsor’s letter and relied instead on the applicant’s description of the family member he wished to visit as *distant*. From the applicant’s point of view *distant* can mean geographically far away rather than distant in terms of the relevant regulations. **I recommended** that the Refusal Notice be re-issued with correct information. I was also concerned that internal briefing notes provided a cut down version of which family members are included in the Immigration Appeals (Family Visitor) Regulations 2003; this is likely to increase the chance of error.

UKvisas’ response:

Post has issued a revised refusal notice in the individual case concerned.

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I am pleased to report that all (global 95%) Refusal Notices were in accord with the **Immigration Rules**. In a welcome contrast to global practice all child visit applications were refused under Rule 41 and Rule 46A and I note that the Entry Clearance Manager had taken special note of my previous findings in this regard.

Dubai did, however, have a significant problem both recording and taking into account relevant evidence that had been provided by the applicant. 16% of Refusal Notices contained statements that contradicted evidence in the Application Form and supporting documents. I thought that evidence was being skimmed over or, in some cases, not read at all; for example “*You have not provided any evidence of your financial position*” when the applicant had provided 6 months bank statements for a personal account. In one case, not a representative sample admittedly, where there was a presumption that the visa would be issued, I also found that the Entry Clearance Officer failed to read the papers thoroughly and jumped to conclusions about what the documents indicated. I mention this to demonstrate that hasty skimming is not limited to cases which will be refused.

Entry Clearance Assistants do undertake some basic preliminary document checks and I am pleased to note that training had been provided, with more on the way. Surprisingly therefore, none of the Refusal Notices referred to **verification and risk related evidence**. There were a number of cases where I thought that simple checks initiated or undertaken by Entry Clearance Officers would have aided better quality decision making. As an example, an applicant declared that she was unemployed but bank statements showed a regular salary payment. In the days when applicants were interviewed, she would have been able to explain it was her widow’s pension, but the Refusal Notice commented adversely on the discrepancy. A quick phone call could have clarified the matter. The applicant, in an appeal, had provided information to correct assumptions and the Entry Clearance Officer and Manager agreed to look at the case again.

In both **Amman and Dubai**, there were **joint Refusal Notices** covering more than one applicant despite UK visas accepting my recommendation that this is inappropriate because each applicant pays a handling fee, different applications need to be considered under different Rules and may attract different appeal rights, and there is also a risk of disclosing personal data. Amman mounted a robust defence – visa staff knew of the direction but were not following it because they thought that it took more time – but they agreed that Refusal Notices should be lawful and in accord with guidance and directions.

Refusal Notices from both Posts are less balanced than the global average, with positive points in only 4% and 8% (global = 17%). It is important that there is the impression of **balance** and fairness so commenting, even briefly, on something that meets a requirement of the Immigration Rules goes a long way to demonstrate that all of the evidence has been taken into account. **I recommended** that Refusal Notices should, even briefly, record positive comment where possible, such as “I am satisfied that you are employed as claimed and that the company you wish to visit in the UK is a genuine one”.

UKvisas’ response

[UKvisas refers to its response to similar previous recommendations on this point.](#)

I also noted in both Amman and Dubai that the overall **appearance** of Refusal Notices was patchy and they have not been as successful as some Posts in taming the rather wayward global templates. I have asked UKvisas IT staff to find out why the template for limited appeal rights

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does not automatically insert the applicant's nationality and date of birth. When other templates do that, it is easy to see why busy Entry Clearance Officers overlook the need to do this by hand.

Post decision correspondence

In **Amman**, I was unable to conduct a thorough review of correspondence as visa section policy is to destroy it when the reply is sent. **I recommended** that for general enquiries, correspondence should be kept for a rolling month and post decision correspondence should be retained with the file. If storage space is a problem, then solutions must be found. I did, however, note an efficiently maintained correspondence record with confirmation of prompt responses. In **Dubai**, given the time needed to discuss cases with visa staff, I did not examine correspondence in detail. I noted, however, that the complaints register was more comprehensive than many I see and that a variety of levels of staff had investigated complaints. I liked the regional Feedback Handling Strategy issued by the Deputy Director Visa Services with its emphasis on a rounded view and that commercial partners are part of the overall picture.

UKvisas' response

Post will retain correspondence for a rolling month as the Independent Monitor recommends. Post-decision correspondence will be linked to the Proviso record and therefore the Central Referencing System (CRS) making the information accessible to Ports and all visa issuing Posts.

Overview

I have serious concerns about the way information is presented by the Application Centre in Amman and that, combined with a wholly inadequate response to my enquiry means that Information overall was **Poor**. Performance in the file sample was **Fair**, caused mainly by failing to handle child applications correctly and failing to note applicant specific evidence. Against that, I thought that the visa team were easily capable of higher standards if they felt less rushed and under pressure and more in control of their workloads. My overall assessment is that Amman's performance is **Fair**.

Staff in **Amman** seemed to have a standard, and almost automatic, response – "*We're too busy to*" do whatever it was. That might be true and **I recommend** that UKvisas undertakes a thorough review of workloads, taking into account recent changes in the complexity of casework. **I also recommended** that staff in the visa section re-instate regular team meetings, one of which should review business processes to see where there might be efficiency improvements.

UKvisas' response:

ECM / ECO Resource levels are kept under regular review and ad hoc temporary duty support has been supplied. Restructuring to provide an Office Manager has taken place and recruitment to fill administrative vacancies is ongoing. The Deputy Director Visa Services, Middle East, will take forward a more comprehensive staffing review shortly, factoring in feedback from section meetings.

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I note my concern that a temporary Officer can work on a regular basis for 8 years without attending any formal refresher training. No matter how competent, this must mean spending time on catching up rather than being up to speed and able to help a busy Post. I was even more concerned that the temporary member of staff was expected to stay behind and keep the work flow going even when there was a regional conference on the doorstep. I was pleased to see an immediate response when I raised my concerns but nevertheless, **I recommend** that UKvisas confirms its policy on training for temporary staff.

UKvisas' response

All substantive and temporary ECOs are now required to complete and pass the ECO course. UKvisas is currently reviewing policy on training requirements for existing ECOs in the light of the introduction last year of assessed training courses. This review will consider the potential for successful candidates being awarded "accreditation" for a pre-determined period, after which time refresher training will be mandatory.

In Dubai, I found information provision to be **Good**. Performance in the file sample was **Fair**, caused by failing to take adequate account of evidence. My overall assessment is that Dubai's performance is **Fair**.

The Dubai visa team, and the Consul General, were concerned that the sample period I selected coincided with one of the three Entry Clearance Officers being on extended leave and sick leave so there were additional pressures on the remaining two. That, however, is real life and I was pleased to see that the visa team did not excuse the poor standard of some Refusal Notices, but rather explained how concerned they were. Whilst most of the Posts I visit these days are worried by resourcing levels, I did think that Dubai was particularly under pressure and being driven by demands for speed and quantity rather than adequate quality. I share their concern at the impact of a high volume of official visitors to the visa section and demands made on them in piloting various initiatives. Both are compliments, but do need to be taken into account in resourcing calculations. **I recommend** that UKvisas undertakes a thorough review of workloads, noting my concern at what seemed to be very little administrative support to undertake risk related checks. Dubai will respond well to a better understanding of its work; I was impressed by the strong sense of teamwork and personal responsibility, but rushing is not the answer and working long hours should not be taken for granted.

UKvisas' response:

UKvisas is refining its tool for comparing productivity across the business, as the basis for allocating resources in future. We are also revising the business model to bring about better deployment of resources.

In the longer term, we are looking at the possibility of merging the visa operations in Dubai and Abu Dhabi to give us a sufficiently flexible and robust operation that will be able to adapt quickly to a variety of operational challenges, including staff absences.

Finally, I note my concern that Emirate applications in Dubai are handled differently from those by third country nationals. It is reasonable to require differing amounts of documentary evidence from different nationalities depending on proven risk ratings. I find it unfairly discriminatory to allow some visa nationals to submit a partially complete Visa Application Form when other applicants would be refused on that ground alone. **I recommend** that, with

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immediate effect, all applicants are required to complete the form, and note that a gentle introduction to the Points Based System requirements is fairer, and easier to manage, than a bumpy sudden landing. If the UK Government decides to implement different levels of visas or visa waivers, then and only then, should a so called *lighter touch* operate.

UKvisas' response

UKvisas accepts this recommendation and the Commercial Partner has been advised that all applicants must be required to complete the Visa Application Form in full. Any applicant who refuses to complete the VAF in full will be advised that they run the risk of having their application refused.

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