

## Report on my visit to Accra: May 2008

### Background information

- **Application processes:** Applications from Ghana, Cote D'Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Togo may be made on line or in person at the Visa Application Centre [VAC] in Accra, run by VFS, the UK Border Agency's commercial partner. All applicants attend in person to deliver a signed copy of the Visa Application Form, pay the application fee and provide biometric data.
- **Demand:** In financial year 2007-08, Accra received 37,447 UK applications, a decrease of 13.8 % over the previous year continuing a sustained downward trend from around 82,000 in 2003-4. Excluding children, whose applications cannot be counted separately, 36.1% of applications are for non-family visits.
- **Refusal Rates:** In 2007-08, the overall refusal rate was 52%. I found that visit visa applications (excluding children) for February to April 2008 had a refusal rate of 33% and non-settlement applications had an overall refusal rate of 43%.
- **Staffing:** There are 12 Entry Clearance Officers, 4 Entry Clearance Managers and a (Deputy) Director Visa Services plus a complement of administrative support staff.
- **Surplus and Deficit:** In 2005-06, the most recent figures available, the visa operation recorded a deficit of £3,387,571. Given the sharp reduction in demand in the past three years, this figure has little current relevance and I have asked the UK Border Agency to provide me with more up to date data.

### The Independent Monitor team

Many formal inspectorates work with staff seconded from the mainstream business for short periods. This has the advantage of a steady flow of fresh eyes and the team member takes learning points from his or her participation back into the business. At my request, UKvisas asked its regions and HQ projects to nominate people on the basis of excellent performance. From the applications submitted to me I selected 10 people of varying grades and for this monitoring visit, two overseas Entry Clearance Managers worked with me on the file sample and on projects about customer service and controls.

### The programme

I issued instructions for the file samples I wished to assess. We talked with Entry Clearance Officers, Manager and Assistants. We visited the British Council and met visa staff from the Royal Netherlands Embassy and the Canadian High Commission. The High Commissioner hosted a useful working lunch where I met a number of Ghanaians with an interest in migration,

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global travel and business. During my visit, the UK Border Agency Africa region held its Control workshop in Accra and my team and I attended some relevant sessions.

### Information

- **Websites:** Given my previous comments about out of date and misleading information, I was concerned to note that the British High Commission website says,

*Can somebody else apply for a visa for me overseas? Yes, someone else can submit your application at a UK visa office overseas . . . .*

As everyone must apply in person in order to provide fingerprint data, this out of date information could cause significant inconvenience to those who may have travelled some distance, perhaps from neighbouring countries. There is reference to a VAC in Kumasi which has been closed. There is a link to the Sector Based Scheme for low skilled workers, and only after a wearying chase through various websites, does the enquirer learn that it is not available other than to Romanians and Bulgarians. Visa staff told me that the necessary changes had been made during my visit, but the errors are still there 10 days later. Given that, **I now make a formal recommendation** (1) that the High Commission website is updated immediately. In contrast, the VFS website was simple to navigate with clear and accurate information.

#### UKBAIG response:

[Recommendation accepted. UKBAIG confirms that the High Commission website has now been revised. It no longer contains pre application information and directs enquirers to the VFS website.](#)

- **The VAC:** Normally, VACs are a smart and welcome contrast to official British premises but, in Accra, it is the other way round. The VAC is in a converted house and sizeable queues build up on a dusty roadside. There seems to be little space inside, though it was neat and tidy. I thought that good use was being made of a long roadside wall which had large noticeboards spaced along it and was pleased to learn that visa staff had observed people reading the notices, confirming the need for boards rather than expecting everyone to access a website. I made what have become my normal comments, **recommending** (2) that fees should be described as *visa application fees* not *visa fees* to make it clear that the fee is for the handling process, and that each board should be re-arranged in a sensible reading order.

#### UKBAIG response:

[Recommendation accepted. The notices have been amended in accordance with the changes recommended by the IM.](#)

- I noted that Accra had not corrected information about required passport validity in response to UKvisas' November 2007 direction: this was corrected immediately. Inside, **I recommended** (3) that the banking official who takes the fee should explain that the fees are set by the UK Parliament, rather than by the British High Commission in Ghana, to avoid the impression that fees are set for the benefit the local visa operation.

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UKBAIG response:

Recommendation accepted and implemented.

- The visa team in Accra run a Premium Service for applicants who are perceived as being low risk, including frequent travellers and approved business visitors. Premium Service applicants have a separate outside queuing area, in the shade, though I was not convinced that the grounds for special service were sufficiently clear. **I recommended** (4) that attention should be paid to better information on who might qualify.

UKBAIG response:

Recommendation accepted. VFS are designing larger posters outlining qualifying criteria, and these will be prominently displayed. Information given by VFS and BHC staff in response to telephone enquiries will reinforce the message.

- **The visa office:** In the British High Commission, the set of information leaflets were in a well designed rack in a very pleasant waiting room. Once again, I was concerned to see copies of the recently issued uncorrected visit visa leaflet which had been withdrawn following my visit to Copenhagen last September. It appears that the re-print was done without correcting the information on studying which is no longer allowed on a visit visa. Explaining that UKvisas had not accepted my recommendation for a correction note or sticker, I was impressed to learn that the visa team had done just that before my visit ended. I thought that the information poster on the availability of an interpreter was excellent, as was the notice about courteous conduct. I reviewed 4 months' pre-application correspondence that could not be linked to a later application, noting good quality accurate replies by support staff.

### British Council

I was impressed by the energy and enthusiasm of the Council which works closely with visa staff to ensure there is accurate information on visa requirements for the strong demand for UK based education. The current information programme includes the transfer to a Points Based Process early next year. There has been a rapid expansion of undergraduate places available in Ghana and I noted the trend toward post-graduate education in the UK. The Council commented that whilst overall application numbers were down, the refusal rate for students had dropped from 85% to 55%, suggesting that applications are of better quality and this would fit with a post-graduate profile. The visa refusal rate for short term students remains high at 81% for the period February to April 2008 and this might benefit from further analysis.

### Decision quality file sample

I reviewed 101 files where visas had been refused, in March 2008, on applications within my remit. Compared with the most recent global file sample, using a 10 point quality scale, Refusal Notices scored an overall 75%, placing Accra in the Fair band (global average = 83%, regional average = 87%).

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The sample requested included an additional 15 (14%) cases that were not within my remit. The visa team spotted the problem before handing the files to me, recognising that there had been data entry errors on the case management system. The UK Border Agency does need firm management information, not least of all to ensure adequate resourcing, and my repeated findings of significant errors should be a serious concern. Whilst Accra deserves credit for identifying the problem and confirming that staff would be reminded of the need to take care, UKvisas reminded all staff in August 2007 of the importance of accurate data entry, yet I find problems almost everywhere I visit.

For the 101 cases within my remit, each Refusal Notice had the correct information on appeal rights and all child visit applications correctly mentioned Immigration Rule 46A. I was pleased to see that Refusal Notices were far more balanced than the global average, with positive points in 81% compared with 17% globally. Notices were generally neat and tidy with very few spelling or typo errors, but my quality assessment found many errors caused by careless use of standard paragraphs, commenting for example on sponsors or circumstances in Ghana for applicants from neighbouring countries.

In common with many visa Posts, Refusal Notices suffered from lengthy and hard to understand standard paragraphs, some of which repeated or contradicted comments in other standard paragraphs; the impression was of muddle with topics dotted around in no coherent order. **I recommended** (5) that the team should develop simple and plain English versions of routine paragraphs and that each one should include applicant specific evidence.

UKBAIG response:

Recommendation accepted. Post is working on this in tandem with HQ. HQ is carrying out a wider review of refusal wordings, focusing primarily on non-PBS routes, consulting with key stakeholders, such as Presenting Officers and the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal. This review will be completed by 30 September 2008.

I share Accra's concern that their own versions were abandoned last year after UKvisas issued global recommended paragraphs. The unthinking use of these has led to a worsening in Refusal Notice quality in many places. **I recommended** (6) that Entry Clearance Officers should read through each completed Refusal Notice so they could prevent the bitty, repetitive, contradictory, lack of flow that gives such a poor impression.

UKBAIG response:

Recommendation accepted. ECOs in Accra are now reading refusal notices through in the way recommended in the report. ECMs have already noted improvements in the quality of refusal notices since this was implemented. The Head of Visa Section will hold a meeting with ECOs in June to discuss the report in full and re-emphasise the importance of this recommendation. From this meeting Post will generate an action plan, which will feed into a half day refresher workshop to be held in early September.

Accra scored a low 75% for Refusal Notices being in accord with the evidence provided and **I recommended** (7) that a major area for further work is careful reading of the evidence in the Application Form and supporting documents.

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UKBAIG response:

Recommendation accepted. ECOs in Accra have been reminded again of the importance of accuracy in drafting refusal statements. This will be reinforced during the half day refresher workshop to be arranged for September.

A common mistake was referring to the adequacy or even lack of a sponsor's bank statement when the applicant had said they would pay for themselves and had provided adequate evidence of their own finances. It was also worryingly common to mix sponsors up when there was one in Ghana and another in the UK.

Given the emphasis in Accra on identifying fraudulent documents, I was surprised to find that very few of the sample cases included document verification reports. I note, however, that practice changed in April. There was evidence of verification – with or without a formal report - in 9% of cases but verified evidence was only referred to in 3% of the Refusal Notices.

We had a useful discussion on the impact of Immigration Rule 320 (7b) which was introduced last month. My view is that until the courts clarify evidence expectations, it will be necessary to retain evidence of alleged fraudulent documents or statements for 10 years in case there is a challenge. In one case, the refusal was based on the fact that there had been several similar sponsorship letters; of course this might have been the genuine one but even if it were not, the evidence base needs to include copies of the apparently similar documents. My view on culpability for child applicants whose application is linked to alleged false information from their parents has been superceded by the recent Ministerial concession for applicants whose breach of immigration law took place when they were under 18. My view that the child's Refusal Notice should include a simple statement that the parents have been refused under IR 320 (7b), without further detail, still stands on data protection grounds.

### **Post decision correspondence**

In the file sample, we found that 9% of cases had post decision correspondence (global 4.4%), and in 5% of cases the correspondence was a clear complaint relating to service, mostly of errors about evidence in the Refusal Notice. I examined a suitably detailed e-record of complaints and looked at a small sample in detail. I thought that the Entry Clearance Manager level responses to complaints were generally careful and thorough but I was concerned that some complaints about accuracy of evidence had an assistant level routine response. UKvisas accepted my 2007 recommendation that complaints that might affect the fairness and reasonableness of a decision should be assessed by a qualified decision maker, either Entry Clearance Officer or Manager. I noted one serious written complaint without a matching response and learnt that the response had been oral, when the disputed visa refusal had been overturned. I reminded staff that there should be an audit trail for all complaints, and responses must be recorded adequately – all the more so when a complaint has been upheld.

### **Overview**

Ghana's legal systems and stability have allowed a co-operative programme between the UK and Ghanaian bodies, aimed at deterring fraudulent documents in visa applications. If the visa section suspects that a key document is not genuine, it is referred to the appropriate Ghanaian body which may prosecute the applicant. Since 2004, applications supported by fraudulent

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documents have reduced from 30-40% to an estimated 8%, with 5% detected and an assumed margin of error of 3%. The visa section's data was confirmed by figures provided to me by the Ghana Police and the Ghana Immigration Service. However, the strong emphasis on control and deterrence brought the risk of the visa system appearing repressive, focusing solely on poor quality applicants; this is inappropriate in a thriving nation with excellent relationships with the UK. The Ghanaians I met shared my view that Refusal Notices are often poorly drafted and believed that travel for young people seemed almost impossible.

With apparent long term success for the referral programme, the visa section realised the need for balance. In recent months it has drawn up a marketing plan which aims to increase confidence in the visa system and it has embarked on a programme of customer service initiatives aimed at attracting good applicants. "Customer Service" as a whole is not within my remit, though elements of it, such as the provision of information and complaint handling, are. Nevertheless, providing good customer service is a vital component of fair decision making. I do, therefore, commend the Accra visa team for initiatives such as actively promoting business and tourist visas to a targeted proportion of the market and note that the plan builds on very good working relationships with colleagues in UK Trade and Investment and the British Council. The Business Express programme should help genuine young employees who, if sponsored by an approved employer, can be treated as relatively low risk. Careful monitoring of compliance in the early stages will increase confidence on both sides.

Accra already offers higher levels of customer service than most of the places I visit and will continue to build on that. It meets the PSA turnaround times yet offers a welcome, relaxed, flexibility and accessibility. Applicants can call in to the High Commission with queries; if requested to attend they can turn up on a day that suits them; the waiting room is one of the nicest that I have seen and was redesigned when the VAC opened and applicant numbers dropped. All these points suggest that applicants' needs are understood. Though I noted some lengthy waiting at the High Commission, the visa team has tried various methods to improve the problem. I made a simple suggestion that counter staff read the enquiry form to save the applicant re-telling the nature of the query – this speeds up the process and demonstrates that what the applicant has said (written) has been listened to first time. I thought that the decision to have a fixed ten day standard visa processing time provided certainty to applicants whilst allowing time for the necessary background checks.

I rated Accra Fair for its website information, though Good for information provision generally. Accra has a sound reputation and the visa team was as disappointed as I was (perhaps more than I) by its score of only Fair for Refusal Notice quality. When the significant problems came to light during the week, it was a team member who commented that in pushing forward innovation and project work it had lost sight of the basics. Although my complaint handling assessment revealed some problems, the approach and quality of responses merited a Good rating. I thought Accra's relatively recent marketing and customer focus was excellent. My overall assessment is that performance in Accra is **Good** and I left the team discussing its next project - how to improve the quality and fairness of decisions and Refusal Notices.

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