

HOME OFFICE

Government response to the consultation on visitors

The Minister of State for Borders and Immigration and Minister for the West Midlands (Mr. Liam Byrne): This year sees the biggest changes to Britain's immigration and border security system for 45 years. Our policy will deliver strong borders, a selective migration system and an expectation that newcomers earn the right to stay. Our ambition is that migration policy maximises benefits for Britain and manages local impacts.

This strategy underpins our Australian style points system, reforms to spouse visas and requires us to modernise visit visas. I am therefore setting out today a strategy for comprehensively overhauling our visit visa system. Copies are being placed in the Library of the House and include our formal response to our consultation on visitor visas published in December 2007. The full analysis of responses to the consultation can be found on the UK Border Agency website.

In modernising our visit visa system, our ambition is two fold; to let legitimate visitors connect with the UK quickly, and to strengthen still further our border security.

Significant changes lie at the heart of today's strategy:

We will create a separate category for Business and Special Visitors to make clear the activities that are permitted while in the UK. We will bring the current concessions for entertainers and sportspeople within the Immigration Rules as special visitors.

- We will introduce visas for sponsored family visits. Proposals for simplifying the system for family visitors received wide support. I propose therefore to bring forward important changes. Individuals who wish to sponsor family members will need to be licensed by the UKBA. Only British citizens or permanent residents will be able to apply. Sponsors, after being thoroughly vetted, must agree to comply with their duties. We will introduce

a range of sanctions for sponsors who do not ensure their family return home, ranging from a ban on future sponsorship, a civil penalty of up to £5000, and a possible jail term of up to 14 years.

- We will preserve streamlined appeals for family visit visas.

There are two policy areas to which I propose no change following the consultation responses:

- Overseas Domestic Workers (ODW's). We are proud of the protection we afford Overseas Domestic Workers. The current ODW visa will be preserved and then reviewed as appropriate after the first two years' operation of the reformed immigration system, when we have properly road tested our anti trafficking strategy.
- Allowing up to six months for tourist visas. In our consultation document we asked whether we should reduce the maximum length of leave for tourists travelling to the UK from six months to three months. The majority of respondents did not agree with this proposal and we have agreed to retain the maximum length of leave at six months, although the UK Border Agency will have discretion to grant less than the maximum if it judges appropriate.

We know that many have a stake in us getting today's policy right. For this reason we coupled a formal consultation with meetings with parliamentarians, with community meetings with the UK's ethnic minority community and for the first time, consultation in India, our largest visa market, supported by a cross party delegation of community leaders and business people. Six hundred and four additional responses were received regarding the consultation.

I am grateful to everyone who contributed. I will now bring forward changes to both legislation and the immigration rules to give effect to today's announcement. Because of the significance of the changes proposed, I will publish detailed statements of intent in advance of introducing change, together with detailed impact assessments.