



Home Office

**The Home Office response to the Independent Chief Inspector's report:**

**An Inspection of Visa Interviewing**

**March – August 2014**

## The Home Office thanks the Independent Chief Inspector for his report.

UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) has a vital role in driving and implementing change to support the wider Home Office purpose and principles. The Home Office is pleased that the Chief Inspector's inspection of the overseas interviewing programme found evidence of, an effective change programme and, importantly, a programme that is adding real value in driving improvements within the UK's border and immigration functions.

The Home Office is pleased that the Chief Inspector recognised the value of video credibility interviews (more commonly referred to as VTC interviews) in high risk locations, and that substantive interviews conducted at overseas visa posts are adding real value to the decision making process. Interviewing allows decision-makers to make a more complete assessment of an applicant's credibility and English language ability, and as a result make a well-informed decision.

We welcome the finding that staff working in the Sheffield Interview Hub were correctly identifying concerns about individual visa applicants' credibility in a large majority of cases; utilising the full potential of VTC interviews, particularly at high risk locations. We also welcome the finding that interviews had not significantly affected the timeliness of visa decisions, regardless of the type of interview.

We are grateful to the Chief Inspector for highlighting potential areas for improvement, including recommendations that we should: consider taking a more risk based approach to interviewing; reconsider the allocation of interviewing resources; and allow interviewers to have more freedom to deviate from set templates and ask follow-up questions to test an applicant's credibility. We agree with these points and are putting in place measures to implement them.

We also welcome the Chief Inspector's finding that the quality assurance checks at the Sheffield Interview Hub were too focused on the content and completeness of interview records, and his suggestion that more qualitative quality assurance, including better feedback loops between overseas decision making posts and Sheffield interview staff, would improve interview techniques. We are implementing changes to address these points.

The Home Office accepts all seven of the Chief Inspector's recommendations in full.

- 1. Re-assesses whether a risk-based approach to video conferencing interviews would deliver increased benefits and target resource more effectively.**
  - 1.1. Accepted**
  - 1.2. We will re-assess whether a more risk-based approach to interviewing would deliver increased benefits and allow resources to be targeted more effectively. We are already interviewing across a wider range of visa application categories in high risk locations. This will allow us to measure potential benefits and to ensure that resources are directed towards achieving the most value to ensure that interviewing has the maximum effect in terms of robust decision-making.
  - 1.3. We are also developing bespoke interview templates to capture local and country specific risks and have implemented these for some locations. We will work to adopt this approach more widely to ensure that interviews are correctly focussed and adding the most value.
- 2. Widens the scope of the quality assurance regime in the Sheffield Interview Hub to include an assessment of the quality of the interview itself.**
  - 2.1. Accepted**
  - 2.2. We agree that the scope of the quality assurance checks should include a more qualitative assessment of the interview itself.
  - 2.3. The Sheffield Interview Hub has now implemented additional quality assurance measures which include an assessment of the quality of actual interviews conducted, including whether the questions asked were appropriate, and whether additional questions were asked to address potential concerns.
- 3. Improves the level of feedback between front-line ECOs and VTC staff to increase the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the VTC process.**
  - 3.1. Accepted**
  - 3.2. We accept the Chief Inspector's view that the level of feedback from ECOs and VTC staff needs to improve, and that this will increase efficiency and effectiveness in the VTC process. We will establish formal feedback mechanisms for ECOs to comment on the effectiveness of individual interviews, and use this to continue to develop processes. We will also involve ECOs in the development of new interview templates, and establish a programme to allow ECOs to interact with interviewing staff in the UK on a regular basis.
- 4. Uses substantive interviews whenever it is appropriate to do so.**
  - 4.1. Accepted**
  - 4.2. We agree that decision making posts should use substantive interviews whenever it is appropriate to do so. We will re-circulate to staff, an instruction, that where an ECO deems it necessary to interview an applicant in order to make a complete and thorough assessment of an application to enter the United Kingdom, they will do so regardless of the impact on decision making times. We are, however, confident that interviews can be

conducted without any negative impact on application processing times in the vast majority of cases.

**5. Improves interviewing training so that ECOs are equipped with the skills to conduct interviews effectively.**

**5.1. Accepted**

5.2 We accept the Chief Inspector's view. We are already working on an enhanced training package for ECOs to ensure that interviews are being conducted effectively.

**6. Undertakes a trial in which free text option is added to the VTC transcript so that follow up questions can be asked.**

**6.1. Accepted**

6.2 We agree, and have implemented at the Sheffield Interview Hub, the use of a free text option in all VTC interviews to allow for follow up questions. This will be evaluated to see what additional value this brings, in terms of the quality of the interview and usefulness to the decision maker.

**7. Ensures all staff receive mandatory training in equality and diversity.**

**7.1 Accepted**

7.2 We agree, and are in the process of delivering formal training to all staff working at the Sheffield Interview Hub, in line with Home Office training policies.