



Home Office

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

## **An Unannounced Inspection of the service provided by Solihull Premium Service Centre**

**March 2015**

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

UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) aims to be a high performing, consistently competent, customer focused organisation and continually seeks to improve its services. The Home Office welcomes the Chief Inspector's finding that significant improvements had been made in Premium Services since his inspection of the Glasgow Public Enquiry Office (PEO) in 2013.

The Home Office is pleased that the Chief Inspector found that management oversight was effective at Solihull Premium Service Centre (PSC) and that security checks were being conducted in line with the UKVI Operating Mandate. We welcome his finding that the rationale for decisions was clear and that there was effective management of work in progress (WIP).

The Home Office welcomes the Chief Inspector's finding that Solihull PSC was consistently meeting or exceeding its service standard and that applicants were positive about the service they had received. We welcome also his finding that there was a considerable focus on quality assurance and that continual efforts were being made to improve decision quality.

We are grateful to the Chief Inspector for highlighting potential areas for improvement and will consider carefully the issues raised. We note in particular his concerns regarding customers who apply too early for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR). UKVI is working within the Immigration Rules (paragraph 34); completing a specific period of lawful residence in the UK is part of the eligibility requirements of the Immigration Rules for ILR applications. UKVI is committed to providing good customer service and already exercises an element of discretion in the customer's favour by providing a twenty-eight day grace period for ILR applications.

UKVI acknowledges that more can be done to highlight to applicants the consequences of applying too early for ILR and we are placing a warning message on our online application system and strengthening existing warnings in our printed guidance and application forms. We will consider carefully whether it is feasible, and where costs allow, to implement a technical solution to prevent an applicant applying too early for ILR in our wider planned improvements to our online application systems as part of UKVI's future plans.

The Home Office therefore accepts the Chief Inspector's recommendation in part.

**1. Recommendation 1: Take action to ensure that a technical solution is found to prevent premium service applicants from applying for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) more than 28 days before completing the relevant qualifying period; or ILR applicants do not lose the whole of their application fee if they apply via the premium service before they have completed the relevant qualifying period.**

**1.1. Partially Accepted**

- 1.2. The Chief Inspector's report highlights the importance of good customer service and of putting the customer at the heart of service provision. UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) shares this view and aims to be a globally trusted operator delivering excellent customer service and secure decisions.
- 1.3. The Premium Service network is committed to customer service and was recently (September 2014) reaccredited for Customer Service Excellence, achieving full compliance against all fifty-seven indicators. The Chief Inspector found that staff and managers were committed to providing a good standard of customer service and that applicants were positive about the service they had received.
- 1.4. Applicants for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR) must complete the necessary qualifying period before they apply, or their application will fall for refusal.
- 1.5. UKVI is working within the Immigration Rules (paragraph 34) to consider applications where the correct form has been completed, necessary documents supplied and the fee paid. There is no provision in the Rules to "reject" valid applications; moreover, completing a specific period of lawful residence in the UK is part of the eligibility requirements of the Immigration Rules for ILR applications and failure to complete the qualifying period does not provide grounds to reject the application.
- 1.6. As the Chief Inspector notes in his report, fees are charged for consideration of the case and do not guarantee a successful outcome for the applicant.
- 1.7. UKVI is committed to providing good customer service and already exercises an element of discretion in the customer's favour by providing a twenty-eight day grace period for ILR applications. This allows the applicant to apply up to twenty-eight days before they have completed the qualifying period.
- 1.8. The overwhelming majority of applicants apply within the grace period. The number of applicants affected by this issue is small. During 2014, only 0.05% of applications for ILR within the Premium Service network were affected by this issue (26 applications).
- 1.9. UKVI acknowledges that more can be done to highlight to applicants the consequences of applying too early for ILR and will ensure that adequate measures are put in place to highlight the consequences of applying outside the grace period; including placing a warning message on our online application system and strengthening existing warnings in our printed guidance and application forms.
- 1.10. Updates to our online appointment booking system (scheduled for November 2015) will warn customers about the consequences of applying more than 28 days before completing their qualifying period and asks them to either cancel or re-arrange their PSC appointment so that it is within 28 days of completing their qualifying period. Should the customer decide that they wish to cancel their appointment and re-apply at a later date,

they will receive a full refund of the applicant fee (minus £100 if they cancel within 5 days of their appointment). In addition, the guidance notes and the Premium Services pages on GOV.uk have been updated to warn customers of the consequences of applying more than 28 days before completing their qualifying period.

- 1.11. We will consider carefully whether it is feasible and where costs allow to implement a technical solution to prevent an applicant applying too early for ILR in our wider planned improvements to our online application systems which is part of UKVI's future plans.
- 1.12. The Home Office therefore accepts the Chief Inspector's recommendation in part.