This publication was archived on 10 September 2024

This publication is no longer current and is not being updated.

The UK's Points-Based Immigration System
Sponsorship Roadmap

August 2021

Contents

Archived

Introduction

1. Sponsorship of workers and students is a core element of the new UK points-based system, ensuring those who most directly benefit from attracting workers and students to the UK play a vital role in maintaining the integrity of the system. For workers and students, sponsorship maintains a relationship between a recognised UK employer or educational institution and a migrant to ensure that those who come on the work and student routes are genuinely intending to work or study.

2. A sponsorship requirement applies to the Skilled Worker route, to the Health and Care Visa and to the Student route, as well as to some specialised worker routes. Although specific requirements vary by route, for most work routes, sponsors must undergo checks to demonstrate they are a genuine business, are solvent, and that the roles they wish to recruit into are credible and meet the salary and skills requirements (if applicable). Sponsors must also pay a licence fee (and Immigration Skills Charge, where required) and ensure they act and behave in a way which is conducive to the wider public good. Senior personnel and key users of the service undergo criminality and other security checks. Educational institutions are also required to hold educational oversight from an appropriate body, meet an annual Basic Compliance Assessment and undergo additional scrutiny where they wish to teach children.

3. As part of the points-based system, the Home Office is committed to delivering radical changes to the sponsorship process, making it easier for users to understand and navigate, and substantially reducing the time it takes to bring someone to the UK. As we modernise our immigration system, we will deliver a streamlined, simplified and modern sponsorship system that enables a more efficient operation, for users and the Home Office, and encourages compliance. In the year ending March 2021, there were 33,952 organisations on the register of work sponsors, an increase of 9% year on year. The number of organisations on the register of sponsors for study remained stable, at 1,125.[1]

4. Our *New Plan for Immigration: Legal Migration and Border Control* strategy statement set out the reforms made to the sponsorship system in December 2020 and our intentions for 2021. This roadmap sets out the further improvements we will make to the sponsorship system this year, in 2022 and beyond. This document focuses on the forthcoming changes for existing and prospective sponsors, such as employers and universities. These changes will deliver a sponsorship system that will enable employers to have an overseas worker ready to start work faster than in any other G20 country.

Progress to date

5. We have already made significant improvements to our employer sponsorship system as part of the introduction of the UK's points-based system in December 2020. We have implemented reforms that reduce the length of the process to recruit a worker from overseas by up to eight weeks through:

---

[1] ONS Quarterly Immigration Statistics to the year end March 2021.

- Removing the Resident Labour Market Test, reducing the time from identifying a need to hire a migrant worker and acquiring a visa for that worker by four weeks.

- Suspending the cap on Skilled Workers, reducing processing times by up to four weeks for those it affects.

- Making the sponsor licence application fully paperless, and re-designing the sponsor guidance, making the system simpler, more streamlined and accessible.

6. Our sponsorship reforms are part of a wider transformation to make the points-based system streamlined and digital where possible. Enhancements for sponsors, combined with those for applicants, mean a faster end-to-end process from a sponsor getting a licence to an applicant coming to the UK. For example, we have already introduced Chip Checker functionality for a fully digital application system for EEA nationals applying through the new points-based system, benefitting the applicant by reducing the time it takes end-to-end to get from an application to decision by up to one week. The Chip Checker service enables certain cohorts with a chipped biometric passport to prove their identity, verify their passport is genuine, and verify they are the genuine holder of it, from their own home or workplace.[2]

7. Our priority service also gives businesses the ability to apply for faster decisions on their sponsor license applications. The pre-licence priority service is for businesses applying to join the register as a sponsor, and the post-licence priority service is on offer for existing sponsors looking to make a change.

8. We have worked closely with businesses, educational institutions and other stakeholders over the past 18 months on these improvements. This has enabled us to plot a full redesign of the sponsorship system for workers coming to the UK, based upon a core set of objectives that harness technological innovations. Feedback from stakeholders has focused on the time it takes to recruit a worker from overseas, the usability and accessibility of our systems, cost and administrative burdens. Building on the reforms delivered in December 2020, our next steps are set out in Table 1, including deliverables in 2021.

Sponsorship reforms in 2021

9. Our focus for sponsorship reforms in 2021 is to remove and demystify perceived barriers to use of the system, enabling businesses to feel confident in making future investment decisions with a degree of certainty, especially when they have not used the system before. We will continue to deliver changes to support our three core objectives set out in Table 1.

---

[2] Currently the Chip Checker is available to EEA citizens applying to points-based system routes and the EUSS, and those applying to the Hong Kong BN(O) route.

Table 1: Objectives of the redesigned sponsorship system and 2021 deliverables

	Objectives	Deliverables in 2021
1	Speed up end-to-end processing, from applying for a sponsor licence to a worker being approved for a visa.	• The progress outlined in paragraph 5 has already created time savings for employers by up to eight weeks compared to the pre-December 2020 processes. To go further we are reviewing the documentary evidence for becoming a licensed sponsor and how these might be simplified.
2	Improve a sponsor's experience of using the sponsorship system, reducing the burden on them to maintain their licence and providing the functionality and transparency they have asked for.	• Q4 2021: Establishing a service that can lend support to small and micro businesses, working with our business stakeholders. We are currently undertaking research to ensure we deliver the right support service. • Q4 2021: Commencing a review of our fees for those who use the sponsorship system to ensure they remain fair as we roll out the new system. • Q4 2021: Introducing an enhanced Skilled Worker eligibility checking tool, making it easier for prospective employers and workers to understand if a particular job is eligible under the Skilled Worker route.
3	Prevent abuse of the system, including effective management of information risk.	• Q4 2021: Piloting our new salary check feature with HMRC to check employees are being paid the amount the employers committed to pay them.

Sponsorship reforms in 2022 and beyond

10. We have a range of ambitious technological and system reforms planned from 2022, underpinned by ongoing testing of our design with stakeholders. These reforms will deliver a system that is faster and simpler, with a reduced administrative burden on sponsors. This will enable us to be global leaders in helping sponsors access overseas talent to start work and study quickly and effectively in the UK. In Q1 of 2024 our reforms will mean that the sponsorship system will be:

- Delivering a faster end-to-end process for sponsors and the workers they employ to further reduce the time it takes to recruit people from outside the UK.

- Simpler for sponsoring new workers through re-using information the government already holds where possible.

- Streamlined through improving the accessibility and usability of our systems, with a single online dashboard which will make it easier for sponsors to understand the status of their sponsorship licence and the actions they need to take.

11. Getting to this end state will require a significant package of work, the building blocks of which are set out in Table 2 on page 8. The IT transformation packages, improved guidance and enhanced customer experience will together deliver the fully transformed sponsorship system that will benefit all users.

Improvements for customers

12. We will deliver a faster end-to-end customer journey by reducing the time it takes to obtain a sponsor licence from the point of application to the application being approved. We are reviewing our service standards and will deliver improvements by Spring 2022.

13. From our previous engagement with SMEs we have gained some insight into the factors that may prevent some employers from applying for a licence. We are currently undertaking more detailed research with organisations to understand and address these barriers to ensure we deliver the right support package.

14. Our ambition is to offer a shorter service standard for straightforward, compliant applicants. We have bolstered our priority service offer, doubling the cap for post-licence priority service requests from 30 to 60 per day. Further to this, we will be reforming the licensing renewal patterns for sponsored employment routes and simplifying the system for users.

IT Transformation

15. One of the key elements of our sponsorship transformation plans is the build of a new sponsorship IT system. This new system will make it easier for sponsors to understand their licence and any information they need to provide.

16. The build of the new service will be broken up into three initial delivery packages, each of which will be rolled out to a very limited set of users at first. This set of users will be chosen to cover a cross-section of businesses including SMEs and larger employers, and organisations that are active enough to use the developments in this new service. The purpose of the phased roll-out is to provide an opportunity to test and learn with real users as early as possible before gradually increasing the volume of users. A great deal of complex technical work is required to deliver this streamlined user and sponsor journey, and the full roll-out may take approximately two years. Due to the time it will take, we will continue to make improvements to the current system during 2021 and early 2022 (as set out in Table 1).

17. Once all three delivery packages have been built, we will have an end-to-end service which meets the core needs of new and existing sponsors, delivers significant transformation benefits compared to the current service and provides the foundation for further enhancements in the future. We plan to start moving some employers to the new system by the middle of 2023 and aim to have all licensed employers on the new system in Q1 of 2024. Our planned delivery dates are set out in Table 2.

Table 2: IT transformation delivery packages

Package	Planned delivery dates for limited roll-out	Deliverables
Sponsor a Visa	Mid-2022	This package will deliver a streamlined customer journey for existing sponsors wishing to sponsor a worker. It will provide the functionality to invite the worker to make their visa application once the role details have been approved, and to pre-populate that visa application with role information provided by the sponsor. This will streamline and remove duplication in the user journey for the sponsor and visa applicant, and enable sponsor and applicant data to be aligned to make casework activities more efficient.
Manage a Licence	End of 2022	This package will deliver an improved online management system for all sponsors to carry out post licence activities. For example, it will allow sponsors to make changes such as adding users to their licence, more easily. We propose to provide organisations with a view of their sponsored workers, their status and prompts to action at the appropriate time. This system will use data better and more efficiently, by enabling automatic checks against data held by departments such as HMRC and Companies House. This would include validation of whether someone was linked to the sponsor organisation, which would be provided by HMRC automatically. The new system will allow for greater understanding about the sponsor and their sponsored worker for the Home Office, helping to support compliance. By bringing together information held by other departments about organisations, caseworkers will have a fuller picture of the data on a sponsor and sponsored worker, allowing for quicker decision-making.
Become a Sponsor	Early 2023	This package will make it easier for prospective sponsors to apply for a sponsor licence. Where appropriate, it will introduce automated data checks to validate whether a user is employed by, or is an office holder of, a sponsored organisation, and validate key details about the organisation. This will reduce the opportunity for abuse, reduce and simplify the evidence requirements placed on prospective sponsors, and reduce casework processing times.

18. Taken together with the business process reforms, such as new guidance, stakeholder engagement and caseworking training, this new technology will provide a vastly improved experience for employers. There will be a simpler application process, more usable and accessible systems, less bureaucracy and paperwork when demonstrating they are fulfilling their assurance duties, and faster end-to-end processing for the majority of applications.

Compliance

19. Compliance remains central to our approach to sponsorship. We make relevant checks on all potential sponsors, including on past criminality or immigration offences, to ensure the safety of those coming to the UK for work. As with the previous system, sponsors may be subject to compliance visits from the point they apply to be a sponsor and throughout the period they hold a licence to ensure they are capable of carrying out their sponsorship duties.

20. Key protections for workers, such as the maximum 48-hour working week, will be monitored via these visits. The transformed sponsorship system will make greater use of technology to identify abuse and we will continue to work closely with our key partners. Our new salary checks with HMRC will enable us to ensure that employees are being paid the amount their employers committed to pay them. We will target compliance visits to those sponsors who present a higher risk or have no track record of compliance. Sanctions for non-compliance may range from conditions or limits on recruitment, managed action plans, or suspension and revocation of a sponsor licence.

> **Case study: What our proposed end state will mean for employers**
>
> Toby is a manager at a growing technology company. He needs a French-speaking software engineer to develop a specific set of applications. In this situation, our end state will mean:
>
> **Quicker end-to-end processing:** Toby will experience a faster end-to-end process for getting a sponsor licence. Automated checks with HMRC and Companies House mean that Toby's application will be identified for fast-track approval, so Toby will need to provide less paperwork, reducing the burden on him. On applying for their visa, Toby's software engineer will see that their application form has been pre-populated with information already provided by Toby, making the process quicker and simpler for them.
>
> **Improved customer experience:** Toby will no longer have to renew his licence every four years. He will be able to apply to sponsor a worker, log in to see the status of his worker's visa application, and get automated prompts.

Sponsoring Students

21. Our plans for sponsorship transformation extend to students and their sponsors. We want to engage with the sector to agree how we can best make further changes to the sponsorship of students. We will further improve compliance through better data

sharing with sponsors, combined with easier-to-view information to measure compliance and act where required. Working in conjunction with education providers, we will explore how we can deliver reforms to the strategic design of student sponsorship to deliver benefits for users.

The Global Business Mobility route

22. The new Global Business Mobility route for overseas businesses seeking to establish a presence here or transfer staff to the UK will be launched in Spring 2022 under the existing sponsorship system. Improvements will be made in line with the wider sponsorship transformation project outlined in this document. The new sponsorship system will make it easier for overseas businesses to assign and manage workers coming to the UK under the Global Business Mobility route.

Engagement strategy

23. We are committed to delivering a comprehensive sponsorship engagement strategy to inform the design and delivery of the new system. The strategy will ensure that:

- Qualitative customer feedback is included in policy and design analysis on the sponsorship system.

- Customer feedback is included in our design work, on both high-level design of the sponsorship system and on technical design of the IT transformation.

- The transformations we have made are fully recognised, by communicating the improvements we have already made to the system, and continuing a regular drumbeat of engagement to communicate when we will make further changes, and the positive impact they will have.

24. There will be a number of key stakeholders for external engagement. This includes known and well-tested audiences from our extensive engagement before and after the launch of the points-based system.

- **Businesses:** A wide variety of businesses from different sectors will be engaged, including premium sponsors.

- **SMEs:** We understand that small and micro employers are often disproportionately affected by changes to the immigration system, so we will continue to support and engage SMEs as a specific cohort.

- **Education sector:** Educators and research organisations are likely to use the system to hire academics, with educators also using the system for their international students to apply for an immigration status.

- **Advisory Groups:** These groups provide the foundation for engagement on the points-based system. Each advisory group is designed to bring together a wide range of stakeholders and sectors and is prioritised based on the economic importance of a sector, its reliance on migrant labour and the potential for future flows to be impacted by the new system. We also run an advisory group that focuses on vulnerabilities, risks, impacts and feedback relating to the points-based system.

Working together to deliver a world-class sponsorship system

25. This roadmap has set out our long-term ambitions for a digital, simplified and modern sponsorship system that meets the needs of both users and the Home Office. This is a significant package of reforms that will provide the improvements we know from our programme of stakeholder engagement are essential. As we move forward with these reforms, and deliver on our engagement strategy, we want to work collaboratively with new and prospective sponsors to make the modernised sponsorship system a success.

Archived