



Home Office

Seema Malhotra MP
Minister for Migration & Citizenship

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Zoe Bantleman,
Legal Director
ILPA
& co-signatories

[REDACTED]

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1st October 2024

Dear Ms Bantleman,

Thank you for your correspondence of 19 August to the Home Secretary and me about the UK's transition to eVisa and wider digitisation.

I appreciate your input and value your engagement with the Home Office, through our fora and advisory groups. This is helping to ensure the UK maintains an effective border and legal migration system.

In your letter, you raised specific issues on data accuracy, the reliability of the technology, how people will travel, how third parties will respond and the impact of the transition on vulnerable people. We agreed that these were important questions and issues, so officials organised and ran five separate 'deep dive' workshops for yourselves and a range of stakeholders over August and September to cover the specific concerns raised in your letters.

We appreciate your time and involvement as these were good opportunities to explore the issues you raise in your letter in depth and in some instances provide reassurance. We value the challenge and continue to reflect on the feedback to ensure our border and immigration system works for everyone.

As a direct result of the points you have raised, both in your correspondence and at these sessions, we are now sending personalised, targeted communications to BRP holders via text messages; and we are creating additional material for local authorities to use in supporting vulnerable and protected groups with the transition to eVisa.

Furthermore, at the engagement sessions with my officials, you expressed concerns about the amount of evidence that a customer applying for No Time Limit (NTL) is asked to provide to establish that they have not lost indefinite leave to remain (ILR) by being outside the UK for more than two years. We have been working on changes to the application process which will address this.

By the end of 2024, the NTL application form will be amended. Customers will be asked whether they have been outside the UK for a period of two years or more, but the digital prompts for evidence of residence will be removed. The only documents requested as part of the application process will be the document demonstrating ILR and their passport or travel document demonstrating their most recent entry to the UK.

Going forward, caseworkers will normally accept a declaration that the customer has not been outside the UK for more than two years. However, in some cases we will make further enquiries, so we can be satisfied that the person has not lost their ILR.

Caseworker guidance will give examples of the circumstances where we may contact the customer to request proof of residence in the UK since ILR was granted. This might be where, for example, there is information on Home Office systems or any documentation provided to us suggests that the person had long absences from the UK. But for most customers this will be a more straightforward process.

We understand you would like to discuss further the process for those making an NTL application, and their transition to eVisa and that the deep dives to date have not fully covered your concerns on this matter. I can confirm my officials will be contacting you shortly to organise a dedicated deep dive on this subject.

My officials also note your concerns over the lack of a 24/7 phone line for people to use if they are experiencing difficulties with their eVisa. Customers can access the eVisa Webchat at: <https://ukimmigration-support-webchat.homeoffice.gov.uk/evisa>, comprising a virtual agent and live chat facilities. The virtual agent provides automated responses to a wide range of queries from a prepopulated knowledge base containing continuously updated articles, enabling customers to self-serve their queries 24 hours a day. This should be able to answer the majority of queries that people have, and we welcome any feedback on how the knowledge base may be improved.

However, if the virtual agent is unable to resolve the query after multiple attempts, the customer will be redirected to a UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) Resolution Centre agent who will respond to queries via live chat. This facility is available during dedicated operational hours only; outside this time the virtual agent and the eVisa webform will continue to be available for queries. Our phone lines are open 8am to 8pm Monday to Friday and 8am to 6pm Saturday and Sunday. In addition, and recognising the concerns that have been raised around travel and potential time zone differences, carriers will have access to a 24/7 phone line if there are issues while travelling.

You also raised concerns about the process for individuals to recover their UKVI account. On 14 August, we launched Account Recovery Online which is a self-serve 24/7 solution to allow customers to safely recover access to their UKVI account online, rather than having to contact the UKVI Resolution Centre, as has previously been the case. Customers can access Account Recovery Online via account log in screens within the "View and Prove" or the "Update My Details" services or directly via the <https://update-your-details.homeoffice.gov.uk/account-recovery/help> page on GOV.UK. The Resolution Centre is still able to unlock account access over the phone for those who are not able to use the online service, and both online and telephony services have appropriate safeguards in place to confirm the identity of the individual seeking to access the account.

My officials heard your concerns regarding an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) for the transition to eVisa, and if this can be published. We plan to publish an updated overarching eVisas EIA in due course.

We have two eVisa-related equality statements already published:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/eu-settlement-scheme-policy-equality-statement/policy-equality-statement-eu-settlement-scheme> - on the first phase of the roll-out of eVisas to EEA nationals, and <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/digital-only-right-to-work-and-rent-checks-equality-impact-assessment> - considering equalities issues in relation to the use of digital only right to work and rent checks.

We are committed to ensuring that all customers, including the most vulnerable, are properly supported as we transform our immigration system, and on 18 September we announced that we are providing up to £4 million dedicated grant funding to a UK wide network of voluntary and community sector organisations to deliver valuable support to those who need it, as part of the transition from physical immigration documents to eVisas.

Grant funding agreements are in place with four organisations who will provide national coverage, and are as follows:

England	Migrant Help
Northern Ireland	Advice NI
Scotland	Citizens Advice Scotland
Wales	Welsh Refugee Council

Alongside this, we expect to fund a UK wide network, comprising more than 60 community-based organisations, details of which will be published on GOV.UK in the coming weeks.

This practical support will be free of charge and available for people with a range of needs, including but not limited to:

- disabled people
- children
- people with severe mental health conditions
- victims of human trafficking
- victims of domestic abuse
- people with significant language or literacy problems
- people without a permanent address
- homeless people
- elderly or isolated people

Further information about the four national grant funded organisations and the support that they can provide is available here: . <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evisa-community-support-for-vulnerable-people>. This will be updated to include the full UK wide network of organisations.

I appreciate you have also raised concerns about lack of public awareness, and I can confirm that we will be launching a paid eVisa advertising campaign to run from this autumn to the end of 2024. This will comprise advertising across a range of channels, including out of home, radio and digital advertising, targeting those who are most likely to be using physical immigration documents, and encouraging them to take action to access their eVisa on GOV.UK at: <https://www.gov.uk/get-access-evisa>. This will supplement ongoing activity in support of the eVisa transition.

Both the Home Secretary and I are closely involved in our rollout of eVisas and aware of the issues you have raised. Senior officials will continue our dialogue with you.

We welcome the ongoing engagement with ILPA, the co-signatories of your letter, and all our stakeholders, who together can help us to deliver these significant changes and provide the best possible guidance and support to our customers as they interact with the UK's border and legal migration system. I would be grateful if you could share this response with your co-signatories and will hope to meet in due course.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "S. Malhotra". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Seema Malhotra MP
Minister for Migration & Citizenship