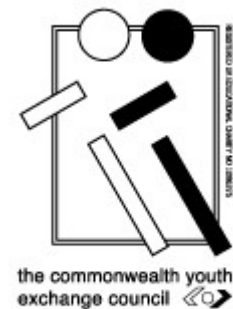


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FOR YOUR URGENT ATTENTION

VISA (MANDATORY ENTRY CLEARANCE) REQUIREMENTS FOR INCOMING GROUPS FROM VISA NATIONAL COUNTRIES

To: All UK groups planning exchanges with Bangladesh, Cameroon, Fiji, The Gambia, Ghana, Guyana, India, Jamaica, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia.

1. As you will be aware, visas (ie mandatory entry clearance certificates) are required for groups visiting the UK from the above-mentioned countries.
2. Regrettably there have been attempts to gain UK entry visas under the auspices of youth exchange programmes when the intention is in fact to enter the UK for other purposes. There have been incidents when individuals have 'disappeared' during the exchange programme and even from the airport on the very day of departure. Abuse of youth exchange programmes, although rare to date, is thus a concern for CYEC and for everyone keen to protect youth mobility in the Commonwealth.
3. The above action has been very harmful to youth exchange programmes and has led to suspension of some bi-lateral programmes. CYEC has been in discussion with the Foreign & Commonwealth Office about how procedures can be improved to ensure abuse does not happen and that the good name of Commonwealth youth exchange is protected. In so far as it is possible, therefore, please establish the bona fides of partner organisations and group participants. Ideally the young people planning to visit the UK should have participated in hosting your group during their overseas visit so that you know them. It is important that you know who is coming and how they have been recruited and selected and feel confident that they will return home at the end of the exchange programme.

THE VISA APPLICATION PROCESS

4. **Early application** for visas by your partners is essential as it can sometimes take 12 weeks or more to process applications. Contact the British High Commission in your partner country as early as possible (eg 6 months in advance) to find out how long visa applications will take, as this varies from country to country. Encourage your partners to submit their applications as soon as possible. In some countries there are now Visa Application Centres – check out the local British High Commission web site for further information. Only bona fide BHC-accredited visa application centres should be used. Make sure you have a good understanding of the information your partners will need to submit as part of the application process, so that you can facilitate and prompt.

You should then do the following:

- **Passports.** Prompt your partners to obtain their passports **as soon as possible** (passports will be necessary in order to apply for visas – and passports require birth certificates).

- **Obtain Visa Forms.** Prompt your partners to make contact with the nearest British High Commission **as soon as possible** to begin the visa application process by obtaining the correct forms. It should be noted that there is a fee for the issuing of visas. Usually members of youth exchange parties should all make application at the same time. They may all have to attend for interview with Entry Clearance Officers. **The whole process takes time.** In some countries the waiting time for interview can be up to 12 weeks at busy times.
- Ensure your partners are aware that the screening of applicants for visas is sophisticated and therefore:
 - existing UK family contacts need to be declared on the application form – to do otherwise risks rejection
 - under no circumstances should forged paperwork be used
 - previous visa applications, whatever the outcome, should be declared (including for other European countries and the United States) – some information is shared
- **Issue Letter of Invitation to your Partners.** Write a formal letter of invitation to your partners, inviting them to send a youth group to the UK to participate in a youth exchange visit. This should be typed on your official letterhead. Send it to your partners. They should enclose a copy with their visa applications. (They should also travel with the letter in case it is needed at Immigration Control on arrival in UK). Enclose a copy of the agreed programme.
- **Write to the Senior Entry Clearance Manager** of the overseas British High Commission to confirm that you have formally invited your partners to send a youth team to the UK to participate in a youth exchange. Enclose a copy of the letter of invitation to your partners and the programme for information. It is important to establish the bona fides of the relationship. Therefore, provide some background context and history on the exchange. If your group had contact with the High Commission staff during your overseas visit, as CYEC recommends you do, make reference to this.
- **In your letter, clearly list the names, addresses, dates of birth and passport numbers for your visitors.** If possible, provide brief biographical information on each individual participant (their background, status eg school student etc).
- **Confirm your Sponsorship of Living/Programme Costs in UK.** Support your partners' application for visas by confirming that your organisation is responsible for meeting the costs of the formal programme in the UK in order to provide reassurance that visitors have the means to support themselves and will not become a burden to UK tax payers. If you are sponsoring airfares, confirm this.
- **Further supporting evidence** which groups are often asked for, and which may help to reassure concerns of entry clearance officers, include:
 - Copies of letters from CYEC giving details of grant awards
 - Lists of names and addresses of host families or details of where your partners will be staying if home-stays are not planned
 - Copies of your organisation's most recent bank statements

Providing as much information as possible upfront can help to prevent delays being caused by High Commissions needing to seek clarification or additional information.

- **CYEC Letter of Confirmation**
CYEC can assist in the visa process by confirming the bona fides of your exchange programme. Send us an email with the names, addresses, dates of birth and passport numbers of your visitors, which we can send to the British High Commission in advance of visa applications indicating our support for your exchange. **You should aim to send us this information 3 MONTHS before the visit is due to take place.** We will copy the letter we write to the British High Commission to you for information.

- **Preparation for Interview.** Your partner group may have to attend an interview as part of the visa process. If so, group members will be individually interviewed: they must be able to show a clear involvement in and understanding of the youth exchange project and be able to explain their previous involvement in hosting your group and the reason for their visit to the UK. If there is any doubt about the motives of a person seeking leave to enter the UK and their intention of returning home afterwards, Entry Clearance Officers are instructed to refuse entry. The interview will be conducted in English unless requested otherwise.
 - **Do NOT purchase any tickets** until you have it confirmed that visas have been issued. Evidence of provisional booking information may, however, be helpful.
5. **Dates of Visit to UK.** Visitors should request visas **for the duration of the exchange programme only**. Even though standard visas for 6 months will be issued, youth exchange visitors should return home immediately after the official exchange programme has been completed. If there are good reasons for individual visitors seeking leave to stay in the UK for a slightly longer period after the official exchange programme, this must be stated when applying for visas. Seeking extensions to visas whilst in the UK is damaging to the reputation and future of youth exchange programmes. **Under no circumstances should participants illegally remain in the UK beyond the expiry of their visas.** This has caused the suspension of Commonwealth youth exchange programmes with some countries.
 6. **Final decisions** on all visa applications are made solely by the **Entry Clearance Section** of the relevant British High Commission. CYEC grants **DO NOT** guarantee the issuing of visas and we are **NOT** able to influence the decisions made on the ground by Entry Clearance Officers.
 7. **Arrivals in UK – Port of Entry.** As UK hosts we advise that you do the following:
 - Provide your partners with a letter addressed to the Chief Immigration Officer at the port of entry (eg Heathrow/Gatwick). This should confirm the purpose of their visit to UK, the dates of their visit, and that your organisation will be responsible for visitors' living costs for the duration of the exchange visit. Indicate that you will be at Airport Arrivals to meet your visitors and will be available to confirm any matters should the need arise at Immigration Control – and provide a mobile telephone number in case Immigration needs to contact you. Each member of the visiting group should carry a copy of this letter.
 - As a back-up system, write directly to the Chief Immigration Officer at the UK port of entry a week before your visitors' arrival with the same information as in the previous paragraph above.
 - If there are any problems at port of entry, visitors with prior entry clearance have the right of appeal.
 8. **It is the host group's responsibility to ensure that visitors return home at the appropriate time.** The FCO's advice is as follows:
 - Overseas groups/organisations should be asked to sign a contract agreeing to the terms of the exchange i.e. that there is to be no staying on after the official exchange programme has finished.
 - UK group leaders should request the passports and plane tickets of visitors for safe keeping throughout the exchange visit – this ensures passports and tickets do not get lost.
 - On departure, UK group leaders should escort the group to the airport and return passports and plane tickets only immediately before the group goes through customs.

During the exchange, any contact with family and friends here in the UK should be 'programmed' i.e. hosts should know where visitors are going and to whom, even if this

is during 'free time' – safety and welfare conditions make this desirable, not simply a concern to close down the potential for absconding.

9. If you experience any difficulties, please inform CYEC as soon as possible.

10. UK Visas. The website for further information can be found at:

www.ukvisas.gov.uk

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