



Home Office

Rt Hon Caroline Nokes MP  
Minister of State for Immigration

2 Marsham Street  
London SW1P 4DF  
[www.gov.uk/home-office](http://www.gov.uk/home-office)

Chi Onwurah MP  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

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*Dear Chi*

Congratulations again on securing the 19 June 2019 Adjournment Debate on visa processing algorithms and for providing us with the opportunity for discussion around the use of technology to improve the working of government and to improve people's lives. In the course of the debate, you asked a series of questions, which you kindly then laid out in your letter of 5 July, to which I am now writing to respond.

As I am sure you are very well aware, by its simplest definition an algorithm is a series of instructions or a set of rules that are followed to complete a task. The streaming tool which is operated by UKVI Decision Making Centres is an algorithm but, as I explained in the Adjournment Debate, it is not anything that involves machine learning or artificial intelligence, and crucially **not** automated decision making. The streaming tool, which was created by Home Office employees, is used to allocate applications to decision makers and uses global and local historical data to indicate whether an application might require more or less scrutiny. It does not make choices about what data is to be considered. As I also explained in the Adjournment Debate, the streaming tool is effectively an automated flowchart where an application faces a number of basic "yes / no" questions to determine whether an application is considered likely to be straightforward, or possibly more complex.

The streaming tool does not determine the decision, only the process that is undertaken prior to a decision officer assessing the application and the requirements for decision manager assurance. For every application, regardless of its stream, an Entry Clearance Officer must carry out a range of decision-making functions before arriving at a decision, most notably an assessment of whether an application meets the requirements of the relevant Immigration Rules. No additional data beyond that provided by the applicant is used by the streaming tool and no personal data is being shared by use of the tool. Personal data is not stored or saved in the steaming tool and all data held by UKVI is processed in line with GDPR requirements. Unsuccessful applicants can lodge an appeal or a request for Administrative Review of the decision if they are applying in an appropriate category.

Visit visa applications were one of the three exemplar services identified for redesign in the Home Office Digital Strategy (published in 2012), which envisaged an entirely digital model for visa applications and processing/case-working. That strategy also envisaged changes to enable swift decision-making where it is appropriate, and support different approaches to delivery, where a more 'agile' approach could realise benefits quickly. We have made great strides towards delivering this strategy. Again, as I mentioned in the Adjournment Debate, UKVI received more than 3.2 million applications in 2018 of which just under 2.9 million were granted and 97% of visit visas were processed within the target of 15 working days.

The streaming tool has been in development since 2015 and reflects UKVI's journey towards being digital by default. In conjunction with the online interface set out in the Home Office Digital Strategy, which customers use to apply for any type of visa or permission to enter or remain, the streaming tool has built upon and replaced the previous manual system within which paper applications were manually sifted against streaming indicators such as previous compliance with immigration rules. The streaming tool is not networked or shared via the web. Each Decision Making Centre operates its own particular version of the streaming tool. As I have mentioned above, no data is stored using the tool, nor is any additional personal information saved or stored using the tool. As I believe I have made clear, the streaming tool contains no elements of artificial intelligence. Were the Home Office to plan to use the streaming tool for anything beyond the allocation of work, it would only be right that such a move take place after consultation and referral to all appropriate regulatory bodies and in accordance with Cabinet Office guidance.

Instructions or a set of rules to follow to complete tasks will be introduced and amended on a regular basis in the visa assessing process and elsewhere across the BICS system and wider HMG agenda. For example, whenever a change is made to the Immigration Rules, new instructions will be published for caseworkers.

It is the role of the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration is to help improve the efficiency, effectiveness and consistency of the Home Office's border and immigration functions through unfettered, impartial and evidence-based inspection. It would not be for me to say which regulator would be responsible for wider HMG activity, as that would be a matter for the Cabinet Office. As I said at the Adjournment Debate, you made some important points regarding algorithms and the regulation of their use, which must be taken up by the Cabinet Office and DDCMS to make sure that we have regulation that is effective and in the right place.

I would like to thank you also for your invitation to join you and the chairs of other APPGs on 16 July for the launch of the report on Visa Problems for African Visitors to the UK. I was pleased to attend and to see so many others in attendance at the event. I am most grateful for your report, which I appreciate is the culmination of research gathering and which covers an issue upon which many MPs and Peers have strong views.

As I said at the event, there is evidence that the visa system does sometimes go wrong and there are areas where improvements are needed. It is important for the Government to know where the problems are and what difficulties are being experienced. Again, as I said at the event, it is good to hear when we have got it wrong, as this is the best way we can learn and strengthen our systems. If this report helps us to do our job better, then I am extremely grateful for it. I have asked my officials to review the findings of the report and I will respond in due course.

I am also copying this letter the Home Affairs Select Committee and will place a copy in the House Library.

*Yours ever*  
*Caroline*

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