



UK Visas
& Immigration

STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES:

AO Grade Decision Makers

Owner: Central Operations Team

Date: November 2017

Version	Date	Author
1.0	July 2015	REDACTED
1.1	July 2015	REDACTED
1.2	October 2015	REDACTED
1.3	July 2017	REDACTED
1.4	November 2017	REDACTED

1. Appropriate Grade

The introduction of the enrichment framework, and the ongoing analysis of Immigration risk by route, nationality and point of application, has provided a standardised way of risk rating applications in all locations. Whilst the application still needs to be assessed against the relevant Immigration Rules, in many locations a combination of the RAG streaming, enrichment and Intel analysis will have identified a cohort of applications where there is an evidenced low risk of immigration harm, and/or that any subjective judgement required against the Rules has been addressed through objective enrichment activity or intelligence analysis.

Where the subjective judgement is largely mitigated, the assessment of such applications against the Rules is relatively administrative. A requirement remains to check, confirm and possibly amend information but only a very limited requirement to exercise anything other than basic judgement and problem solving skills. Such structured and straightforward assessment has been JEGS assessed at AO level and AO grade decision makers are an integral part of the processing model employed across UKVI.

For the sake of clarity, the equivalent overseas grade to AO is Entry Clearance Assistant, the grade immediately below an ECO.

2. Key Principles

For the sake of clarity, these application types must be identified by **one or more** of the following characteristics:

- a) That any mandatory documents are present and valid and that all information provided supports the statements that have been made by the applicant on the VAF
- b) That there has been no significant change in the applicant's circumstances since any previous decision to issue a visa (if appropriate)
- c) The decision maker is not required to mitigate any potential match revealed by a VIMA result, with the exception of a previous Issue or Refusal match
- d) The officer is only required to use minimal problem solving skills or judgement to verify responses to questions and documents presented against straightforward elements of the Immigration Rules, in order to reach an outcome.

Candidates for these AO grade decision makers can be recruited from within existing ranks either temporarily for the peak periods or in longer term locally engaged positions.

However, these decision makers must not consider applications from within their own nationality without specific authorisation from UKVI SCS.

A baseline of suitable applications has been authorised centrally as detailed at Annex A below. These include:

- Identified objective visa routes including
 - Differentiated T4 and dependents
 - Russell Group University T4 students

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- T5 Youth Mobility Scheme
- Tier 2 ICT
- Diplomatic and Official – Visits only (not Exempt / Postings*)
- Exempt* – Heads of State and large Ministerial delegations only
- Visit – Transit / Visit – Standard applications – Low risk (Green) where the applicant has previous travel and compliance to the UK
- Preferred Partner schemes where a sponsoring organisation has provided an additional level of assurance

(*Individuals applying as Exempt may require confirmation as to eligibility, either from the ECM/HEO or via FCO Protocol Directorate. They should not therefore routinely be considered to be binary, unless local processes allow for the ECM/HEO check to take place prior to ECO allocation).

- “OFFICIAL SENSITIVE” clearance is required for these roles in order to be fully effective and to access to mandatory check results. Where only “OFFICIAL” clearance is held, such caseworkers will only be able to resolve a subset of the straightforward applications where there is a confirmed “NO MATCH” result. However, given the additional Volume 2 considerations, as well as travel history which can apply to all applications, all DMCs should aim for clearance to Official-Sensitive for the role to be fully effective.

3. Regional Differentiation

Additional application types may be appropriate and which may vary between each Decision Making Centre.

For each DMC, the application base for AO grade decision makers should be evidenced via the Streaming Decision log. This should be reviewed in the first instance by the Regional Operations Manager or equivalent at the Operational Review Meeting (ORM) held each month. The recommendations should be presented to the Regional Director or equivalent, for authorisation using the template at Annex B. Once agreed, this should be sent to the Central Operations Team for record keeping and for continuous review of the global SOPs.

Caseworkers in these roles must have these application types streamed to them in accordance with these instructions. There may be efficiencies to be obtained by consolidating the data entry, operating mandate and assessment roles into one stage and using this to triage/escalate applications where the objective criteria are not met – see exceptions and escalations below.

4. Training

Specific pass/fail training courses have been developed for these roles. Bespoke courses will be tailored to the category of applications covered by the relevant business area, and may include:

- a) Visitor Standard and Transit
- b) Short Term Students

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- c) Tier 2 Intra Company Transfer
- d) Tier 4 General and Child Students
- e) Tier 5 Youth Mobility Scheme
- f) PBS Dependents Tier 2 ICT and Tier 4
- g) PROVISO, CRS, CID / i-Search
- h) Travel documents and forgery detection
- i) Keeping Children Safe
- j) Operating mandate

Training for Visit-based DMCs will concentrate on Issues and deferrals, as AOs will not be expected to write subjective refusal decisions. However, they should be able to identify when an application needs to be escalated. Training for Work and Study teams may also incorporate administrative, points-based refusal writing.

5. Exceptions and Escalations

Most circumstances which would be problematic for these roles should be streamed out by effective use of the Streaming App Outcomes. However, AO decision makers should be able to identify where and when an application has been streamed incorrectly, notably where an application should be streamed at the front end as AMBER or RED because the applicant has

- a) declared any form of criminal conviction on the application form
- b) declared any association with a terrorist or criminal organisation on the application form
- c) indicated on the application form that he/she has previously had medical treatment in the UK to which they were not entitled
- d) indicated on the application form that he/she has a UK National Insurance Number to which they were not entitled
- e) declared any other form of suspect Immigration history (removed / deported / excluded etc) or criminal / political / terrorist sympathies / connections on the application form
- f) Any misalignment of biographic information – passport and system data does not match
- g) Applicant or sponsor the is the subject of a Local Alert entry and/or ILORD entry
- h) An adverse WI/IDENT match other than a previous visa issue, or ECR
- i) A biometric error

Or alternatively where

- j) The application is from a child not travelling with his/her parents (subject to the local processes in place for unaccompanied minors)
- k) a point of submission interview has been conducted and the interviewer highlighted potential credibility concerns
- l) Where the caseworker holds the same current or previous nationality as the applicant
- m) The applicant has declared any previous travel to countries of concern
- n) A travel history that indicates a disproportionate amount of time being spent in the UK as a visitor (greater than 6 months in any 12 month period?)

6. Local Referral Procedures

REDACTED sets out the requirements for mandatory referrals to **REDACTED**. The Streaming App cannot capture all these requirements for classification reasons. CT referrals also carry a higher classification. As such, it is essential that AO decision makers are appropriately cleared (Official – Sensitive) to receive training in the referral requirements, for re-allocation to a Duty Officer or dedicated team of substantive EO-grade decision makers.

7. Governance, Assurance & Integrity

Line management of AO grade decision makers can either be at EO or HEO (ECM) level. A structured DQ review system must be in place to monitor process compliance and signed off by the Regional Director or equivalent. New staff will be subject to 100% checks of initial decisions, scaled down as experience increases. The suggested strategy is:

Day 1	100%
Week 1	50%
Week 2	25%
Week 3	10%
Thereafter	in line with the Review-to-Risk policy

AO grade decision makers should be allocated a dedicated an EO mentor for application escalation and general guidance. This mentor should ideally be the first port of call for escalation approvals, however, where circumstances prevent, any other substantive EO can provide approval. The EO should record the escalation and approval, including the reason for escalation and the approving officer's name, as a case working event note.

8. Additional Responsibilities

There is no requirement or expectation for AO grade decision makers to be allocated additional casework duties beyond the scope of these SOPs. Deferred applications may be reallocated back to them, if the outcome of the deferral brings the application back into scope. Whilst AOs would normally be allocated line management responsibilities, under these SOPs no allocation will be made. AO grade decision makers may be required to undertake other duties at the ECM/HEO's discretion.

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Appendix A – Central Authority

All Locations	Authorised by
Visit – Transit: Streamed as Green and additional previous UK or 5CC travel	REDACTED Central Operations Team November 2017
Visit – Standard (except Child Unaccompanied): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Streamed as Green and with previous UK or 5CC travel Preferred Partner Schemes Diplomatic ppt holder on Official travel (not Exempt) 	REDACTED Central Operations Team November 2017
Short Term Student: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Streamed as Green and with previous UK or 5CC travel State Sponsored 	REDACTED Central Operations Team November 2017
Exempt <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Heads of State or Ministerial delegations 	REDACTED Central Operations Team November 2017
Tier 2 Intra Company Transfer (ICT) + dependants	REDACTED Central Operations Team November 2017
Tier 4 General + dependants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Differentiated under Appendix H State Sponsored Streamed as Green and attending Russell Group Uni 	REDACTED Central Operations Team November 2017
Tier 4 Child Student: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Differentiated under Appendix H State Sponsored 	REDACTED Central Operations Team November 2017
Tier 5 Youth Mobility Scheme	REDACTED Central Operations Team November 2017
Allowed Appeals, ARs and JRs, or as overturned by ICQAT: No match following manual X-Check	REDACTED Central Operations Team November 2017
Passport Passback: No match following manual X-Check	REDACTED Central Operations Team November 2017
Endorsement Errors which require a decision to be revoked and re-issued	REDACTED Central Operations Team November 2017

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Appendix B – Regional Variations - Regional Director Authority template

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