

Visa ruling 'a delight' after long battle

New immigration guidelines set culturally arranged marriages under own category

Lincoln Tan

Couples no longer need to prove they have been living together to be eligible for a visitor visa under the Culturally Arranged Marriages (CAM) category.

Visitors under the category will also be exempt from border restrictions, and Immigration NZ has confirmed it will continue to process applications under the category despite suspension of most other offshore temporary visas due to Covid.

South Asian Community Leaders Group chairman Sunny Kaushal said INZ confirmed the new rules during an online meeting with community representatives on Thursday.

"It's been a long battle, but it is great to have new rules and guidelines that reflect a better understanding of the tradition of culturally arranged marriages."

The new rules clearly set culturally arranged marriages under its own category, apart from other general partnership-based visas.

INZ acting general manager border and visa operations Stephanie Greathead said the meeting was one of a regular series held with



Sunny Kaushal

stakeholders, including migrant communities, to provide updates and discuss immigration issues.

"INZ has been processing culturally arranged marriage visitor visa applications from offshore for the last 12 months," she said.

"People granted these visas are exempt from border restrictions and are able to travel to New Zealand."

Processing for visitor visas applications made under the CAM category would continue because it was considered a relationship visa.

Under the new guidelines, if an individual was travelling to join a partner, they may be considered a genuine applicant if other conditions like health and character were met.

An applicant who is already married, or is intending to marry in New Zealand, would be granted a three-month visitor visa.

"The changes may provide individuals who have met and undergone a traditional cultural ceremony, but who have not lived together with an opportunity to come to New Zealand to live together so that they may later



There have been 843 applicants for culturally arranged marriage visitor visas in the past five years.

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satisfy immigration partnership visa requirements," the agency said.

Other partnership-based visas required a couple to be living together in a genuine and stable partnership before a visa could be granted.

"If an applicant is granted a CAM visitor visa, they may be able to apply for a partnership evidence of a cultural marriage," INZ said.

"Substantive evidence must be provided to demonstrate that the marriage follows an identified and recognised cultural tradition."

Successful candidates had six months to make their first entry to allow them time to secure flights and managed isolation or quarantine in New Zealand.

Kaushal said the changes were "a delight for many in the ethnic com-

munities" and brought "some happy news in these stressful times".

It was a big achievement by the local leaders from the Indian, Pakistan, Nepal, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lankan communities who have been in regular meetings with INZ since 2019, he said.

Kaushal said culturally arranged marriages was widely practised in South Asia but many here had faced "extreme prejudice" because of them.

"Culturally arranged marriages has been one of the most successful institutions of marriage in the world, with divorce rate less than 4 per cent.

"But many couples here faced discrimination, even with immigration processes, because of them.

"It has been an uphill challenge, but it is great to have INZ now understand

the importance of this tradition among Asian communities."

Kaushal said last Thursday's meeting achieved a resolution to the sensitive matter after a long battle.

Typically, culturally arranged marriages follow identified cultural traditions where marriages are made by people, for example the couple's parents.

The rules up until November 2019 were that the marriage ceremony had to take place in New Zealand for couples to be eligible. This policy was changed in 2003 to include marriages that had taken place overseas.

In the past five years, there had been 843 applicants for the visitor visas, of which 264 were approved. In the 2020/21 year, 157 applications were declined and 92 approved.