

COVID-19

Disabled Student Allowance (DSA)

Frequently Asked Questions – Updated 9th June 2020

This document is intended to answer questions from stakeholders relating to operational queries for Student Finance England (SFE) and Student Finance Wales (SFW). For the purposes of this document SLC will be used to mean both SFE and SFW. Any distinctions between approaches within the separate operations will be made clear. This document does not aim to give organisations advice or instruction on how they should be responding to the current situation. These arrangements are exceptional and are subject to change.

Applications

Can SLC make any adjustments for those students who cannot get section 5 of the full DSA application completed by their HEP?

Yes. We understand that it is unlikely to be possible for our customers to get this section of their application completed by their HEP during this time. We will therefore be able to accept an email from a student's HEP (from a university email address) in lieu of a signed and stamped section 5. The email must confirm the following; Academic Year, Course Name, Course Start Date, Course End Date, Year of Study e.g. Year 2 of 3, Mode of Study e.g. FT or PT, Intensity of study i.e. 50% of full time equivalent – We **must** have this information for part-time students and Level of Study e.g. Undergraduate or Postgraduate.

Please note section 5 information is only a requirement for students who are applying for DSA only on an undergraduate course and those applying for a part-time or postgraduate courses.

Can SLC adjust the requirements for students who need to sign their DSA application?

At the present time we can accept scanned copies of application forms which have had a wet signature. We can also accept digital/electronic signatures. This is where the student has been able to sign their application using a digital method, for example using the digital signature features within the PDF or signing using a tablet/touch screen.

Full time undergraduate students, making their first application for DSA, can apply alongside their online application for tuition fee and maintenance support, this means that they can “sign” for their DSA application online and don't need to print anything.

What adjustments can be made to the medical evidence requirements?

A student wishing to apply for DSAs is required to submit medical/diagnostic evidence in order for eligibility to DSAs to be determined. Evidence can be in the form of a diagnostic assessment (for students with a SpLD), or medical evidence from a GP or consultant, or other qualified medical practitioner or appropriate specialist. Evidence should state the nature of the student's disability and must also briefly explain how the student's disability impacts upon them.

SLC understands that customers may be experiencing difficulties or delays in obtaining new evidence in support of their application. In these cases we would encourage students to apply now and provide any evidence which they already have, so that the team at SLC can review in full in order to try and establish a customer's eligibility for DSA support.

Needs Assessments

Can needs assessments be carried out remotely?

Yes, needs assessments can be carried out remotely. There is no need to seek prior authorisation for this from SLC. Remote assessments can be carried out if this is down to student preference or because of a change in business practices initiated by the particular centre. The location of the assessment on the NAR template can be recorded as "Remote Assessment" or similar. To be clear a student does not have to have a remote assessment if they do not feel comfortable with that. In these cases the student would need to wait until it is possible to have a face to face assessment.

As long as the advice from government remains that social distancing should be in place SLC will continue to allow remote needs assessments to take place without the need to seek prior approval on a student by student basis. If there is to be any change to this approach it will be communicated in advance.

What steps are SLC taking to ensure that students know that a remote needs assessment is possible?

We have updated the content of our letters which inform a student to book their needs assessment to explain that a remote needs assessment is an option during this period. We have also asked that if their preference is to not have a remote assessment that they still make contact with a centre as soon as they can so that when restrictions are lifted they can get booked in quickly. We expect our needs assessment centre colleagues to be supportive of student preference in these cases and when circumstances allow book them a face-to-face appointment.

SLC regularly send reminders to students who have been made eligible for DSA but who have not yet had a needs assessment, the content of this communication will be updated to reflect the opportunity to have a remote assessment.

Can needs assessments be carried out by email?

We do not think that it is possible to provide an effective needs assessment via email. It is acceptable to carry out assessments over the phone or via a method of video call.

Can ergonomic assessments be carried out remotely?

SLC does not believe that an effective ergonomic assessment can be carried out remotely and therefore these should not take place remotely.

Can need assessments be sent without PGP encryption?

No. It would not be best practice to remove processes which help satisfy GDPR requirements. If Assessment Centre staff are moving to a model of working from home, we would ask that PGP

software is installed on their machine to allow this process to continue. If you require a copy of the SFE or SFW Needs Assessment PGP Key please email dsa_requests@slc.co.uk If a centre is struggling to set up PGP for homeworkers we will be able to support in getting this set up.

Non-Medical Help

How will cancelled sessions of non-medical help be dealt with?

The usual policy for cancelled sessions of non-medical help will continue to apply. Please refer to the information within the guidance chapters:

Student Finance England: <https://www.practitioners.slc.co.uk/media/1714/1920-guidance-dsa-new-students-from-ay-201617-v50.pdf> - Section 4.14

Student Finance Wales: <https://www.studentfinancewales.co.uk/media/198476/sfw-1920-disabled-students-allowance-v40-qag-updates-february-2020.pdf>

The standard policy will continue to apply for instances where remote sessions have to be abandoned because of technical issues. Remote sessions of NMH support were carried out prior to COVID-19 and this does not require a change in approach.

Can non-medical help sessions be delivered remotely?

Yes, where it is appropriate to do so sessions can be provided remotely. It is for a provider and their customer to determine whether it is appropriate to provide the support remotely. The provider must be confident that the support can effectively be delivered by remote means and the student must confirm that they are content for the support to be delivered remotely. We would not generally expect NMH sessions to be taking place if teaching on the student's course is suspended. Any sessions which are carried out remotely should be charged at the providers remote hourly rate.

To clarify it is appropriate for students to continue to receive non-medical help support if they are still engaged on their course and/or teaching is being delivered remotely. The reference above to suspensions relates to instances where a HEP may have chosen to formally suspend all teaching and activity on the course.

What steps are SLC taking to ensure that students know that a remote non-medical help is available?

Whilst the delivery of remote non-medical help is not a change due to the current situation, we have updated the content of our correspondence to highlight that this is an option for a student should they wish to have support delivered in this way.

Can non-medical help be carried out by email?

We do not think that it is possible to provide effective support via email. It is acceptable to provide non-medical help sessions over the phone or via a method of video call.

SLC understands that there may be some students for whom a phone call is not an appropriate way for receiving one-to-one support. In these instances, a service such as Text-Relay can be used.

How does a provider get confirmation of support delivered remotely?

Where it is not possible to obtain a wet signature from a customer SLC will be able to accept email confirmation from a student's registered email address. The provider should submit their standard timesheet (signed by the support worker) and an email from the student's registered email address confirming that the session took place with the invoice. This will enable the invoice to be processed first time without the need for SFE to request additional information. A student's "registered email address" is the one which they use to log on to their online student finance account.

Please note that the preference is for any response/confirmation from the student to come from their registered email address as held on a student's SLC account. However, we have been made aware that this might not always be possible, in these cases we would be able to look to accept confirmation from a HEP registered account. If a student's HEP email address does not contain their name (i.e. 1234@universityoflife.ac.uk) then they should confirm this within the body of the email. Please note: a timesheet must still be provided in all instances where email confirmation of support is provided.

For further information about acceptable forms of digital signatures please contact dsa_electronic_queries@slc.co.uk

If a support worker cannot sign a time sheet how can they confirm that a remote session of support has taken place?

Where ever possible support workers should continue to sign time sheets to confirm that support has taken place. SLC can also accept digital/electronic signatures. This is where the support worker has been able to sign using a digital method, for example using the digital signature features within the PDF or signing using a tablet/touch screen.

For further information about acceptable forms of digital signatures please contact dsa_electronic_queries@slc.co.uk

Will SLC authorise additional sessions of non-medical help support for students to help them deal with the impact that the current situation is having on their mental health?

No. The role of a mental health mentor is quite different to that provided by mental health advisors or counsellors, and is intended solely to help students with mental health issues develop strategies to access their learning. Students requiring therapeutic or medical support, advice or guidance should be referred to their HEP or the NHS as appropriate. Mental health advice and counselling does not fall under the remit of DSAs, and specialist mentors should not be providing advice or counselling. However, we recognise that the current situation is having a significant impact on student's ability to undertake their studies in the manner to which they would have ordinarily have done and if necessary, requests for additional specialist mentor support should be made in the usual way.

If a student requires additional hours of NMH support in this academic year, will the normal process of the recommendation being provided by the assessor to SLC still apply?

Yes. In line with established processes any additional hours of support which are needed should be discussed between a student and their needs assessor and a recommendation should be made to SLC. It is not appropriate to award additional hours of NMH to every student as a matter of course based on the current situation. We know that the average up take of NMH support is around 20% of the amount of support which is agreed, it is therefore anticipated that the hours already agreed for the majority of students would be able to meet any additional need which arises during this period. Any requests for additional hours will be reviewed on a case by case basis and issues presented by COVID-19 will of course be considered.

SLC do not believe that it is necessary or appropriate to change established processes and allow non-medical helper providers to request additional hours of support themselves. We would encourage providers to ask students to engage their needs assessors in good time, to allow for additional recommendations to be made and reviewed before a student has used their full agreement of hours.

Providers

If a provider cannot deliver a service to a student (i.e. equipment delivery, session of non-medical help) do they need to notify SLC?

We would expect that providers ensure that they continue to communicate effectively with their customers during this period. If the student is not due to start their course until later in the year then it may be appropriate to postpone equipment delivery, orientation, etc., until nearer the time.

If a provider is not able to support a student and the student does not wish to wait until the situation changes the provider should ask them to contact their needs assessor. We would expect a needs assessor to make every effort to ensure that updated quotes are provided from providers who can meet the student's needs at this time. Requests to change provider will be reviewed in line with current processes.

If a provider is not able to accept any new students, they need to contact SLC to advise them of this, so that they can be temporally removed from the online list. We can add a provider back to the list once the situation changes.

Can providers submit invoices to SLC by email?

As an exceptional arrangement during this period SFE are able to accept invoices by email. Full instructions are included at the end of this document.

Providers must ensure that invoices and supporting documents which are sent via email are clear and legible, failure to do so will mean that additional copies will be requested.

We are not able to accept photographs of documents which are then converted to PDF as the file size is too large.

SFE have an electronic invoice system in place for secure transfer of invoices via an API, however, this requires the sender to build their own secure front end to link to this system. Additional information on this system can be requested from, dsa_electronic_queries@slc.co.uk.

Can SLC send invoice remittances via email instead of on paper?

It is not possible for SLC to issue remittances electronically at the current time.

As a taxi provider can I continue to invoice for journeys that would have been taken if the student had been studying at their HEP?

The purpose of DSA funding is to help cover additional costs which a student incurs as a result of their disability. If a student is not attending their institution, then there is no additional cost and it is not possible to pay taxi companies for journeys which have not taken place. When accounts are set up with taxi companies there is no guarantee of the amount of journeys which will be taken or paid for.

As a provider of DSA support am I entitled to claim supplier relief as outlined in Procurement Policy Note 02/20 (PPN 02/20)?

We have confirmed with the Department of Education and Welsh Government that as we do not have contractual agreements in place PPN 02/20 does not apply to the payment of DSA funding. We would like to reassure providers that the payment of invoices on behalf of our customers is a core service and SLC will endeavour to process payments as quickly as possible to support providers in the current challenging circumstances.

Other

Will SLC be providing HEPs with information to share with students about the current arrangements?

We feel that it is more appropriate for HEPs, should they wish, to develop their own communications for their students as it will allow them to reflect the bespoke arrangements which exist in their own institutions. HEPs can of course use the messages within this document to inform those communications.

Are processing times going to be impacted?

SLC have delivered significant operational changes in order to continue delivering services to our customers. All customers are being strongly advised to start their application process as soon as possible to ensure finance and support is in place for the start of term

How will course extensions be dealt with by SLC?

SLC understands that it's likely that course extensions will be awarded as a matter of course by some HEPs. Discussions are ongoing regarding some aspects of the administration of this but we are pleased to be able to confirm these points:

Course Extension Is Within the Academic Year (Not Final year Student)

In these cases we can pay for DSA support that is taken within the AY and we do not need confirmation from the HEP for each student.

Course Extension Is Outside the Academic Year (Not Final Year Student)

Where HEPs are allowing extensions past the end of the standard AY, if the student is not in their final year and we have received and accepted an application for 20/21, invoices will continue to be paid as normal. The date of the support will determine which year to make the payment from as per normal processes.

Course Extension Is Within the Academic Year but After the Course End date (Final Year Student)

Discussions are ongoing regarding the administration of this scenario and we will provide an update shortly.

Course Extension Is Outside the Academic Year (Final Year Student)

Discussions are ongoing regarding the administration of this scenario and we will provide an update shortly.

Providers are reminded that course end dates should be confirmed with the student, these should not be requested from SLC.

Will SLC be advising providers of any courses which have been suspended?

No, it has never been practice for SLC to inform providers of suspended courses and it is not possible to introduce it. In line with established procedures providers should be speaking to their customers and if they are advised that a student's course has been suspended they should cease providing support.

What impact will the situation have on applications for the 2020/21 cohort of students?

Advice to prospective applicants has been published online:

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/guidance-for-prospective-students> They are being asked to continue making applications. Although these are extraordinary circumstances, we will continue to process applications as quickly as we can.

Will SLC accept remote Specific Learning Difficulty (SpLD) assessments as evidence to support a DSA application?

It would not be for SLC comment on whether remote SpLD assessments are appropriate. The organisations who set the standards for SpLD assessments would need to determine whether a remote method of assessment meets their requirements.

Guidance on what SFE and SFW can except as evidence of SpLD can be found online:

SFE: <https://www.practitioners.slc.co.uk/media/1754/ssin-0420-sasc-diagnostic-assessment.docx>

SFW: <https://www.studentfinancewales.co.uk/practitioners/policy-information/information-notices.aspx>

Practitioners should be referring to guidelines outlined by SASC about the requirements for evaluations of need.

How do students who are at the end of their course get support in place quickly?

SLC have a Late Application process whereby a student's disability adviser can make recommendations for non-medical help and general allowance without the need for the student to have a full needs assessment. This process can be used by any student who has less than 14 weeks left on their course and has not yet had a needs assessment.

How will the current situation with COVID-19 impact the tenders for the equipment and training and needs assessment service?

There have been unavoidable delays to concluding the tender process and bidders have been made aware of the updated timelines. We will make further announcements on this in due course.

When should providers of needs assessments, NMH and equipment start working with student's face to face?

It is for individual companies to ensure that they are adhering to government guidance in terms of social distancing and it would not be appropriate for SLC to provide guidance this matter.

Provider invoices via email – Instructions

During the current unprecedented situation, SFE have been able to make arrangements for providers to be able to submit invoices via email. Please note that the below relates solely to invoices which are to be submitted to SFE, processes for SFW remain as usual.

SFW is able to accept invoices via email and invoices for students funded by SFW should be sent using the following email address: SFW_invoice_team@slc.co.uk

There are several points to note when submitting invoices via email to SFE:

- The content of emails will not be read or responded to, any questions or queries should continue to be directed to: invoice_team@slc.co.uk
- Invoices and timesheets must be attached to the email in a PDF file format – no other formats can be accepted
- Attachments must not be password protected – if you are unable to send documents which do not have password you will not be able to use this method of submitting invoices
- It is preferable for the invoice, timesheet and/or supporting information to be in the same PDF and attached as one file but, where this is not possible, they should be included as separate PDF attachments within the same email
- Only one invoice and corresponding evidence (i.e. timesheet) should be included in each email
- As with the current process invoices should only contain information for one student
- The subject of the email should be the student's CRN and your invoice number/reference, if you do not have the student's CRN their surname and DOB should be included

New invoices should only be sent to the inbox which has been set up for this specific task which is: dsa_submit_invoice@slc.co.uk

Amended invoices and responses to invoice queries should continue to be sent to: invoice_team@slc.co.uk