

COVID-19

Frequently Asked Questions

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.

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 to have a face to face assessment until the advice from the government changes.

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 tell 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.

We have requested that additional text is added to the postcode search – currently hosted on gov.uk- which also explains that the option of remote assessments is available to our customers. There are no other specific mentions to needs assessments being carried out face-to-face on gov.uk and as these are temporary arrangements, we will not be updating any other sections.

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. We understand that this will mean that these will need to be suspended until government advice changes.

UPDATE v2: Since the publishing of the original FAQ document we have been contacted by a number of organisations and have been asked to review this position. The information is being considered and any change in the approach will be included in future revisions.

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>

UPDATE v2: 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 continue to 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.

UPDATE v2: 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 DSA2 letter 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.

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.

UPDATE v2: 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 been 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.

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 DSA funded support is to help students address the barriers to learning created by their condition. It is not appropriate for specialist mentors to be provide general support for mental health difficulties as this is not something which falls under the remit of the disabled student allowance.

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.

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?

No. Due to the current situation SLC understands that a provider may not be able to provide support to a student during this time. We would expect that suppliers 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.

Can providers submit invoices to SLC by email?

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 is currently no facility for SFE to receive invoices via email. Due to the volume of invoices received it would not be possible to accept them to one of our general inboxes as there is a significant risk that an inbox would not be able to handle the demand. SFE do 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.

UPDATE v2: It is a standard business process for SFW to be able to receive and process invoices via email. The reason that this is possible for SFW is due to the volume of invoices received by the team in Wales, it is significantly lower than that received by SFE.

In the last year SFE received in excess of 400,000 invoices and our current mail boxes would not be able to handle monthly volumes at this sort of level, even as an interim measure. This would represent a significant risk that emails would be rejected without notification to either party.

SFE are looking into the possibility of accepting invoices via email as a matter of the highest priority and will provide a further update as soon as possible. We must ensure that we put in place a robust process to ensure that this method of submitting invoices does not cause issues for either party going forward. We ask that providers do not send invoices to any of the existing SFE mailboxes, these will not be processed, and you will be asked to send them in the post.

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.

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 are doing everything that they can to minimise disruption to the service which we provide to students and stakeholders. The immediate priority is to enable a smooth transition to a new way of working.

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. We will take any course extensions in to account when determining whether it's possible to pay for DSA funded support.

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 medical 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.