

Flexible Support Fund Guide

01 Overview and general information

Introduction

1. Flexible Support Fund (FSF) is a budget managed by Service Leaders (SLs) to supplement mainstream services and tailor support to the needs of individuals and the local area.
2. This guidance relates to Work Coach (WC) teams; SLs have their own guidance (Service Leader guide).
3. In terms of FSF usage, the SL is responsible for issuing local guidelines to their Work Coach Team to supplement the national policy outlined in this chapter and the other subject specific chapters of FSF guidance. These local guidelines should set out priorities, any restrictions that might apply or limits that are imposed on the amount that can be spent in particular circumstances.
4. Within the limits set by the SL, and taking account of national policy restrictions, WC teams generally have flexibility and discretion to make awards that will enhance the employment prospects of the claimants, and other customers, with whom they are engaged. However, there are circumstances where FSF underpins a national policy and a payment must be made if the individual concerned is eligible to access FSF.
5. The Flexible Support Fund Homepage, contains links to related instructions and products, including the Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) scripts and worksheets.

Subpages

- Account Codes
- Appeals or reconsideration
- Eligibility
- Flexible Support Fund application appointment
- Flexible Support Fund queries and help
- Labour Market System action
- Management information and checks
- When a payment must or must not be made
- Work Coach discretion and financial responsibilities
- Work Services Platform (WSP) action

Appeals or reconsideration

1. Where discretion applies and a claimant's request is not supported, or the claimant disagrees with an amount awarded, the claimant has no formal right of

appeal. However, if they are not satisfied with the outcome they can ask for one review or reconsideration.

2. They must request this within one calendar month of the day after the decision was made (unsupported requests will be noted in LMS Conversations or within the Notes Space of WSP pages. The case should be examined by another appropriate Work Coach or Work Services Manager.

3. If the decision is that an award is still not appropriate, or the amount awarded was correct, give the claimant a verbal explanation, record it on ES589 (if possible get the claimant to sign this) and note LMS Conversations or 'Notes' space within WSP. If the decision relates to an actual claim form, fasten the ES589 securely to this to maintain an audit trail.

Note: For Universal Credit Full Service (UCFS) claimants, FSF awards must be recorded on the claimant profile. For further information, see UCFS FSF Instructions.

Eligibility

1. In its broadest sense, Flexible Support Fund (FSF) will support a wide range of people who engage with DWP programmes and services. However, it is important to note that in some regards much tighter eligibility criteria will apply. WC teams must, therefore, **always** check subject specific guidance to ensure eligibility is met before making an award or payment.

2. Returning to FSF in its broadest sense, the fund **may** support anyone awarded a qualifying benefit **except** those participating in:

- Work Programme (WP)
- Work and Health Programme (WHP) (with the exception of those customers in the Districts operating the DWP Public Sector Comparator Pilot where FSF can be considered)
- Fair Start Scotland
- Work Choice
- Specialist Employability Support (SES)

3. The qualifying benefits are:

- Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA)
- Income Support (IS)
- Incapacity Benefit (IB)
- Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)
- Universal Credit (UC)
- Carers Allowance (CA)
- Severe Disablement Allowance (SDA)
- Pension Credit (PC)

Note: 'Credits only' claimants, and claimants who have a sanction imposed on their claim, are eligible to support from the FSF.

4. FSF **may** also support anyone eligible for Work Preparation Support for lone parents and carers, and Work Preparation Support for partners' guidance.

5. FSF **may** also support other unemployed people who meet one of the following criteria:

- aged 16 or 17 and Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET)
- awarded one of the following:
 - Housing Benefit (HB)
 - Bereavement Allowance (BA)
 - Child Tax Credit (CTC)
 - Maternity Allowance (MA)
 - Widowed Parent's Allowance (WPA)
 - Child Benefit (including Guardian's Allowance) (CB)

6. FSF may also support people that meet one of the following criteria:

- receiving Jobcentre Plus support under formal partnership arrangements
- receiving Jobcentre Plus support under Rapid Response funding
- receiving support from a DEA, but only in the circumstances described in GP and Hospital Consultant Fees and Travel to Interview for Disabled People
- Lone Parents (LPs) in employment, but only in the circumstances described in the In Work Emergency Payments for Lone Parents guidance

7. Universal Credit Full Service (UCFS) claimants are eligible for FSF from and including the first assessment period if they have:

- proved ID verification, including Habitual Residency Test where relevant
- attended their First Commitments Meeting
- accepted their claimant commitment
- Labour Market regimes

8. Claimants can be considered for an FSF payment if allocated to any of the following Labour Market regimes:

- Intensive work search
- Work preparation
- Work-focused interview
- No work related requirements

9. Claimants in the light touch and working enough Labour Market (LM) regimes are not currently eligible for FSF.

10. For further information see Interim guidance for the use of the Flexible Support Fund in Universal Credit Full Service (UCFS).

Flexible Support Fund application appointment

Booking the appointment

1. Before booking the interview, the telephony agent (TA) or account developer (AD) checks that the claimant is not participating in;

- Work Programme
- Work and Health Programme (WHP) with the exception of those customers in the Districts operating the DWP Public Sector Comparator Pilot where FSF can be considered)
- Fair Start Scotland
- Work Choice
- Specialist Employability Support (SES)
- any other scheme where FSF must not be paid. (FSF does not support these claimants)

2. The claimant has an on-going voluntary work focused work-related interview booked with the WC.

3. Inform the claimant that they must bring evidence for the FSF application. This may include:

- evidence of a job start (for example an email or letter)
- job interview (for example an email or letter)
- bank statement
- costing of clothes from supplier

This list is not exhaustive.

During an appointment

4. When considering the application, the WC refers to the claimant's record to see if a payment has already been made. If a payment has already been made, the WC will need to consider whether another award will help a claimant to start or move towards finding work.

5. If a claimant has already paid for goods or services, Universal Credit can't normally award a back payment of FSF.

6. The WC needs to establish if evidence is needed to support a request for FSF. If not enough evidence is provided, then the WC will tell the claimant to provide it.

7. An award can be made by cash or directly into a claimant's bank account. If the payment is made in advance, they will need to show the receipts for any goods or services that they have paid for with the FSF award. The WC will contact the claimant after 14 days if receipts have not been provided.

8. If a claimant has already paid for goods or services and receives the FSF award to cover these costs, and they can't show receipts, action should be taken as per the following FSF instructions.

Work coach actions to award or not award Flexible Support Fund payments.

9. To action an FSF payment, the WC will:

- discuss with the claimant what support is needed.
- check that the claimant meets the criteria set out in the current FSF operational guidance.

- check the 'Notes' on both Works Service Platform (WSP) and Labour Market Systems (LMS), as well as 'Flexible Support Fund' (FSF) referrals made to the WSP 'District's Flexible Support Fund (FSF) Monitoring' Opportunity or the Advisory Discretionary Fund (ADF) 'Hotspot' to see if any previous awards of FSF have been paid to the claimant. Please note any open referrals on WSP may mean the claimant has failed to provide receipts and possibly 'Over payment action' is being considered or undertaken.
- consider if evidence has been provided to support the application. If there is not enough evidence, the WC will request the claimant provides it.
- advises the claimant that the award is being considered.
- completes all relevant forms with the claimant. Both the claimant and the WC must sign the declaration.
- submits the forms to an authorising officer who must have the correct level of Designated Financial Authority (DFA).

10. The Authorising Officer

- Considers if the application can be approved.
- Returns the form to the original WC. The award will either be approved, declined or an amendment maybe required before approval.

11. The WC will then:

- Discuss the outcome of the authorising officer's decision with the claimant. If there is an amended offer and the claimant agrees to it, new forms will need to be completed.
- Decide if a receipt is required. If a receipt is required, the WC advises the claimant that they need to provide a receipt within 14 days. (Full action can be found in the following FSF instructions.) A 14-day task needs to be set to contact the claimant if no receipts have been provided. On WSP the referral remains open until the receipts are received (if receipts are required)
- Record the FSF award on WSP /LMS conversations, followed by details of the award made, for example the amount, reason for the award, date of award, specific details of what the money will be used to pay for, the Jobcentre location and the work coach's initials.

12. If the award is rejected the WC:

- Gives the claimant an explanation.
- Enters notes in WSP/LMS, stating: 'FSF award declined' followed by details of the reasons for refusing the application, the Jobcentre location and the work coach's initials.
- Selects 'Save and close'.

Note: For Universal Credit Full Service (UCFS) claimants, FSF awards must be recorded on the claimant history. For further information, see UCFS FSF Instructions.

Refusing a request for support

13. If a claimant's request for support is considered inappropriate (for whatever reason) Work Coaches do not have to complete a FSF claim form.

14. It is sufficient to give the claimant a full verbal explanation and make a detailed note in LMS Conversations or Work Services Platform (WSP) Notes space recording the FSF award request followed by details of the amount, reason for refusal, date of refusal, the location of the Jobcentre and the work coach initials.

Note: For Universal Credit Full Service (UCFS) claimants, FSF awards must be recorded on the claimant history. For further information, see UCFS FSF Instructions.

15. This information is available in the event of the claimant:

- making a complaint
- asking for the decision to be reconsidered
- making a claim for the same thing to a different member of the Work Coach Team.

Note: Where FSF underpins a national policy and the individual concerned meets the eligibility criteria laid down, an award must be made.

Refusing award for outstanding receipt

16. Where there is an outstanding receipt or proof of purchase notification, a further Flexible Support Fund (FSF) award mustn't be made until cleared.

17. In exceptional cases, permission must be sought from the Service Leader (SL) to override this restriction.

18. This will encourage greater compliance to clear outstanding FSF transactions by the claimant.

When a payment must or must not be made

1. Although most Work Coach (WC) payments from the Flexible Support Fund (FSF) are discretionary, there are some circumstances where FSF underpins a national policy and, in these cases, a payment must be made if the individual concerned is eligible to access FSF.

2. The sections below explain when a payment must be made and offer some examples of the discretionary circumstances in which Work Coaches might make an award.

When a payment must be made

3. There are circumstances where payment of travel, childcare and, or replacement care must be made to eligible individuals. For further information, see:

- Payment of Travel Expenses
- Childcare Costs
- Replacement Care

4. Work Coaches have discretion to award reasonable travel costs to claimants, taking into account their particular circumstances, who are asked to attend the Jobcentre outside of their minimum requirement of attendance. This includes during the first 13 weeks of their claim, when claimants are mandated to attend weekly when Work Coaches might access FSF

5. It is not possible to list all the circumstances in which you might access FSF. In deciding if it might be appropriate to do so, the guidance you should check is the subject specific chapters, the 'What FSF must not be used for' section of this chapter and your local Service Leader (SL) guidelines. As long as relevant guidance does not prohibit the use of FSF, the decision is the Work Coaches to make.

6. The table below lists the more common discretionary circumstances in which the FSF will be utilised by Work Coach Teams for eligible individuals:

Labour market related travel expenses:

- job interviews - these costs may include overnight accommodation where necessary.
- interviews for disabled people
- other circumstances

Childcare and replacement care costs:

- when attending a voluntary employer / provider / Work Coach interview
- when taking up a job

Training related costs:

- procuring training provision
- travel
- childcare
- replacement care
- allowance payments (link is external)
- other

Other costs:

- removing barriers to work
- In-work Emergency Payments (FSF-IWEP) (lone parents only)
- Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) or protecting vulnerable group checks
- health related support (link is external)
- GP and hospital consultant fees (disabled people)
- Rapid Response Service (RRS)

When a payment must not be made

7. From a national perspective, there are instances in which FSF must **never** be used, these are:

- to support activity which conflicts with DWP policy objectives
- to duplicate any provision which would normally be funded by Government or Partners (including local government or voluntary sector) or commercial providers
- to pay claimant's travel expenses to attend the Jobcentre on their normal signing day (link is external) to pay benefit related travel costs (link is external)
- to directly replace any benefit lost as part of the normal operation of the benefit system
- to top up wages once in work
- to pay fines or similar penalties
- to pay loans or debts
- to pay a subsidy to an employer to provide an incentive to employ a particular person or group of people.
- to cover the cost of living such as paying bills, household costs or buying food (Note: see In Work Emergency Payments for Lone Parents and Barriers to work guidance for exceptions)
- to help claimants who have a job / employment contract but are returning to work after a career break / maternity leave.
- to support applications for immigration documentation, including biometric resident permits, as immigration documentation is categorised as a totally excluded item under the Flexible Support Fund (FSF)

Note: Any requests in relation to immigration matters from claimants should be directed to UKVI (link is external) and employers should be directed to the Employer Checking Service (link is external).

- if the claimant is participating in Specialist Employment Support (SES)
- when a claimant is in receipt of EU imported benefit (Note: Please see instructions for 02 Import of Benefit)
- completion of any medical related certificates or forms

Note: For exceptions see section 6 of FSF guide.

Work Coach discretion and financial responsibilities

Discretion

1. Where WC teams have flexibility and discretion in making awards from FSF, this responsibility must be taken seriously.

2. Each FSF award must be considered on its individual merits. In exercising their discretion, WCs must take into account national and local guidelines and ensure all awards are reasonable and represent good value for money in terms of enhancing employment prospects and reducing the time spent on benefit. Before proposing an award, the WC must first have considered all other possible sources of funding; this

includes making a judgement on whether or not the claimant could, in their particular circumstances, reasonably be expected to fund the purchase themselves.

3. When considering making an FSF award, WCs are encouraged to apply what might be termed a 'tabloid test' - essentially, if the nature of the award **you** made was portrayed in the press as being 'a waste of taxpayers' money', could **you** give an explanation for **your actions** that would stand up to public scrutiny? Applying the 'tabloid test' will also help WCs in relation to discharging their financial responsibilities (see below).

Financial responsibilities

5. When making a discretionary award, WCs must be mindful of the fact that they are awarding taxpayer's money. In this regard, the DWP standards of behaviour include:

- correct procedures are followed in all matters to ensure responsible use of public money
- employees must ensure money, property and other funds are properly safeguarded and not used inappropriately.

6. Failure to follow departmental standards / policy could lead to disciplinary action being taken against the individual(s) concerned.

7. Discretionary spend is subject to local management checks, and Internal Audit may undertake a detailed review of activities / payments at any time.

8. To fully meet the 'standards of behaviour', steps must be taken to identify FSF overpayments and recoup the money. Key to identifying overpayments / inappropriate payments is ensuring awards are fully supported by robust, relevant documentation (e.g. receipts, invoices etc).

9. WC teams must have an understanding of the different payment methods available for FSF and, where they have a choice, select the most appropriate option. Awarding cash in advance (where this is an option) carries the greatest risk of all and should, therefore, only be used where there is no viable alternative and only in very exceptional circumstances, for example, it's the last resort. The Making a payment chapter of FSF guidance gives information about payment options and the subject specific chapters indicate which payment methods are appropriate.