



Department  
for Education

# **The Flexible Learning Fund**

**Specification for project proposals**

**October 2017**

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## Summary

This publication provides non-statutory guidance from the Department for Education. It has been produced to help providers of adult learning, employers and other organisations to develop project proposals to submit to the Flexible Learning Fund, laying out the requirements and expectations of proposals, how they will be assessed, and how organisations can design proposals that contribute to the objectives of the Fund and to the Department's policy aims.

## Expiry or review date

This guidance will be reviewed before April 2018.

## Who is this publication for?

This guidance is for:

- Further Education Colleges
- Independent Training Providers
- Adult and Community Learning Providers
- Higher Education Institutions
- Employers
- Provider and employer representative bodies
- Third sector education organisations

## Background

1. At the Spring 2017 Budget, the Government committed to exploring ambitious new approaches to encouraging lifelong learning. £40 was allocated at the Spring 2017 Budget for pilots aimed at helping adults progress in employment or enter new occupations through re-skilling or up-skilling. The pilots will provide important evidence about what works, and what does not, in engaging adults about the opportunities and benefits of learning.
2. The Flexible Learning Fund has now been launched as part of this pilot programme. The Fund will provide grant support to projects that develop methods of delivering learning that are flexible and easy to access for adults who are in work, or returning to work, with either low or intermediate level skills.
3. Projects must include a period of design and development of the specific delivery method, followed by a delivery phase during which the method is tested with real learners. Projects must centre on the delivery of basic skills, or on intermediate or higher level technical learning. This specification contains further detail on the eligibility requirements and assessment criteria for project proposals.
4. **The deadline for submitting proposals is midnight on 31st January 2018.**

## Aims and objectives

5. The aim of the Fund is to develop and expand our evidence and insight into the effectiveness of scalable learning delivery methods that make learning more attractive and easier to access for adults. This evidence will be used to develop future Government policy and will provide examples of best practice that can be drawn upon by the adult learning sector. There are three key instrumental objectives of the pilot:

**1) To encourage flexible and accessible learning delivery to maximise adult participation and attainment – especially by:**

- Learning providers who have the inclination, but lack some of the resource, to design and test new or novel approaches to delivery are able to do so with Government support.
- Employers with a low-to-intermediate skilled workforce and/or who will benefit from an upskilled labour market supply, and are actively involved in designing ways to support the skills needs of their local economy alongside internally upskilling their workers.

**2) To encourage collaboration between providers, employers, and other relevant organisations in meeting national and local skills needs:**

- Local links and relationships between organisations are strengthened by working together on projects that support the Government's career learning ambitions.
- New relationships can develop through a collaborative approach to projects, which could be facilitated by membership organisations or local Government bodies such as LEPs.

**3) To evaluate projects to understand which are effective and create examples of best practice:**

- Evaluation results will be collected and made available to a wide range of interested parties, as stimulus for similar activities.
- Government, providers and other organisations are able to learn from and build on the evidence generated about the effectiveness of delivery methods tested using this fund.

6. The Fund will be established on a **time-limited** basis, with grant support available until the end of the 2018/19 Financial Year (31 March 2019).

## Target groups

7. This pilot Fund is established in the context of the Conservative manifesto commitment to produce “the best programme of learning and training for those in-work and returning to work in the developed world.”

8. In line with this ambition, the Fund aims to support a range of projects that will improve the way learning is delivered to adults who:

- Are either in paid work, or are looking to return to the labour market<sup>1</sup> following an absence,

### **AND**

- Hold Level 2, 3 or 4 technical skills (or equivalent) and/or have yet to secure basic skills in English, maths or digital, up to and including Level 2.

9. Each project proposal should demonstrate that its target audience fits both of these criteria, and how the method of delivery will cater specifically to the needs of this audience.

10. Within these broad target groups, we expect and welcome proposals that focus more narrowly on particular groups and skill levels. For example, a project may focus on specifically supporting adults with existing Level 3 skills in vehicle maintenance, who are looking to upskill to a higher level and more specialist area such as Advanced Vehicle Diagnostics.

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<sup>1</sup> Those looking to return to the labour market following an absence (Returners) are one target audience of interest, in parallel with the Conservative manifesto commitment to support parents and carers to return to work when and how they wish.

## Categories of interest

11. The Fund has four broad categories of interest. Project proposals should clearly demonstrate that they correspond to one or more of these categories. The bullets listed under each heading are for example only and are not comprehensive.

### 1) **Delivery on a more flexible or convenient timetable**

- A commonly cited barrier to adults accessing learning is an inability to fit around other time commitments – work, family, care etc.
- Projects addressing this barrier may focus on offering learning outside of working hours, or at times that harmonise with work life, such as in between shifts or during lunchtimes.
- They might also explore ways to give the learner control over when they choose to learn, eg through ‘modular’ learning.

### 2) **Making online and blended learning work for adults**

- Online and blended learning can alleviate barriers to learning. Online provision may also be more sustainable and build capacity by allowing learning to be delivered to more people at lower cost.
- Projects in this category could address the challenge of lower digital skills among adults – especially older adults (defined as those aged 50+) – which may make online learning less accessible.

### 3) **Delivery outside the classroom**

- Low take up of learning among adults is often down to attitudinal barriers or a lack of confidence to re-enter learning. This can be caused by previous negative experiences of learning at school or college, which makes returning to a traditional classroom-based learning environment unappealing.
- We welcome proposals that offer learning in more accessible non-standard locations. This may include employer premises and community or faith centres, for instance.

### 4) **Delivery methods that allow for caring responsibilities and returning to the labour market**

- The Government is committed to supporting people who want to re-enter the labour market, at a level commensurate with their skills, after a prolonged absence. Many people in this position will also have caring responsibilities which can be a barrier to re-entering learning.

- Projects supporting people returning to work could place emphasis on refreshing skills as well as teaching new ones. Projects aimed at carers could be located in parent-and-child friendly learning environments.

12. This Fund will not consider proposals for projects that deliver learning which is eligible for Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE) funding. We are specifically interested in the flexible and accessible delivery of non-HE courses – basic or technical skills below degree level (i.e. below Level 6).

## Evaluation

12. The Department will commission an external research organisation to evaluate all of the supported projects. Projects should be designed in a way that is conducive to robust evaluation by an external organisation, and the organisations involved in the project must co-operate with the research organisation both during and after the project itself.

13. Proposals must include a plan for how organisations will monitor delivery. This should include details of what data can be gathered (or failing that, can be easily gathered by the external research organisation) and how this can be done – whether through existing data sources or by new data collection. At a minimum, this should include data on the number of learners undertaking the flexibly delivered provision, both in terms of enrolment and attainment, and the same data for learners already undertaking the learning through the standard delivery method. Demographic information about both groups should also be gathered.

14. The monitoring plan should also demonstrate that the organisations undertaking the project will be able to work effectively with an external evaluator during each phase of the project.

## Assessing proposals

15. Once proposals are received they will be assessed in a number of stages, which are described in detail in Annex A. Please ensure you have read and understood Annex A, as it describes each set of assessment criteria that proposals should satisfy, and the process that will be used to score proposals against these criteria.

16. The criteria are designed to ensure that grant funding is allocated only to projects that contribute to the objectives of the Fund, and to the Department's policy aims.

## Support available

17. The Flexible Learning Fund will award up to £10m, which can be distributed up until the end of the 2018/19 Financial Year (31 March 2019).
18. For successful project proposals, a maximum of £1m in grant funding is available per project; however, we expect and encourage proposals which request a variety of levels of funding, including those requesting amounts significantly lower than this maximum. There is value in supporting projects of different scales and levels of ambition to maximise insights into what kinds of projects can be successful and effective.
19. Under exceptional circumstances we will consider proposals which request a grant totalling more than £1m. These projects will need to present exceptionally good value for money, and lend itself to more valuable and robust evaluation than would have been possible using only £1m.
20. Funding may be awarded for two different types of costs:
  - **Development** costs – to support the design and development phase of the project.
  - **Delivery** costs – we will also consider awarding money, in addition to development costs, to contribute to the additional costs that non-standard forms of delivery accrue, over and above the core costs of delivering the provision in the standard way. For example, for publically funded provision the core costs are the agreed rate paid by the ESFA for AEB or Advanced Learner Loans qualification delivery.<sup>2</sup>
21. Proposals should provide a costings plan (more detail in Annex A) which should state the requested sum of funding, broken down by development and delivery costs, giving a clear rationale for why this amount has been requested.
22. We would expect proposed projects to draw on additional sources of funding besides the grant from the Flexible Learning Fund, as this is likely to make the project more sustainable. It also indicates tangible support for and confidence in the project from the organisations contributing funding.
23. The lead organisation for each successful project will be given contact details for day-to-day queries.

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<sup>2</sup> The core delivery costs, that would be accrued when delivering the learning in the usual way, must still be covered through existing means – most often through AEB grant funding or Advanced Learner Loan funding – and eligibility for these funding streams will be on the basis of current ESFA funding rules.

## Enquiries

24. Any questions about the Fund should be emailed to:

[Fund.FLEXIBLE-LEARNING@education.gov.uk](mailto:Fund.FLEXIBLE-LEARNING@education.gov.uk)

## **Annex A – Assessing proposals**

1. Proposals will be assessed to ensure they meet the Fund's eligibility requirements and minimum criteria (laid out in paragraphs 5-9).
2. All applications that satisfy this minimum threshold will be scored against the excellence criteria set out in paragraphs 10-20. We will also take into account a set of overarching considerations to ensure there is sufficient variety among the projects receiving grant support (laid out in paragraph 21). Officials will consult with external sector representatives to quality-assure their assessments of each project against the agreed criteria, before making a recommendation to Ministers on which bids to award funding.
3. Ministers will sign off on which projects to fund. Once a final decision has been reached, lead organisations for both successful and unsuccessful proposals will be notified of the outcome. Feedback on unsuccessful proposals can be requested.
4. Grant arrangements will be agreed with successful lead organisations and will include agreement on the specific expected outcomes for each project, the conditions, timing and method for releasing funds, and other requirements to be placed on the project participants.

### **Stage 1 – eligibility and minimum criteria**

#### **Who is eligible to submit proposals?**

5. A wide variety of expertise and skills are required in order to propose and deliver a high quality project that meets the Fund's overall policy aims.
6. In addition to single organisations being eligible, we welcome proposals that are submitted on a collaborative basis, whether by a formal consortium or by a nominated lead organisation working in partnership with several others (see paragraph 7 for detail about the role of a 'lead' organisation). Proposals should show the support of relevant employers and/or employer bodies. This could be demonstrated by employers being one of the organisations proposing or delivering the project. We welcome proposals incorporating the expertise of FE providers, HEIs, research organisations, provider representative bodies, and business support providers.
7. Any proposal must identify and provide details of all organisations involved, including:
  - A lead organisation, with whom the grant arrangement would be made, and who would be responsible for distributing funding to other group members where appropriate. This organisation would be responsible for delivering the project in line with the terms of funding.

- One or more delivery organisations, specifically identified as those who will partly or fully deliver the learning. At least one of the delivery organisations must appear on the ESFA Register of Training Organisations.
- Any other organisations who will provide funding, resources, expertise or insight to the project. This may include the expertise of organisations like employers or business support providers, other learning providers or provider-representative bodies, local government organisations or charities.

8. A single organisation may wish to fill several of these roles – in which case the proposal should clearly show how that organisation is equipped with the expertise to do so, and why a collaboration between multiple organisations would not make for a more successful project.

### **Minimum standard criteria**

9. Proposals must adequately meet each of the following requirements, as assessed by an ESFA/DfE panel of officials, based on the information contained in the proposal submission:

1) The project must aim to design, or enhance a method of delivering learning that is not currently widely available, and that is accessible to in-work adults or labour market returners, catering to their specific needs in a way that breaks down barriers to learning faced by these groups.

2) As well as a design and development phase, the project must include a delivery element, where learning is delivered to adults by the method in question, to test its effectiveness and practicality. The delivery must take place by the end of the 2018/19 academic year.

3) The courses that projects choose to deliver must meet the following conditions:

- i. Falling between the following skill levels:
  - For technical learning: Levels 2 to 5 (or clear equivalent) – learning at degree-level and above is not in scope.
  - For basic English, maths and digital: Entry Level 1 up to Level 2.
- ii. Eligible for ESFA funding, whether through the Adult Education Budget or through the Advanced Learner Loans programme.
- iii. Not be an apprenticeship programme. This fund is specifically to support the delivery of learning that would traditionally have been ‘classroom-based’.

**iv.** Ineligible for funding through the Higher Education Funding Council of England (HEFCE). This fund is specifically to support projects that deliver learning outside of the 'prescribed HE' space.

Under exceptional circumstances, and on a case-by-case basis, we may consider projects that would deliver provision that is not currently eligible for ESFA funding. You must be clear on why you wish to use different provision, and why existing ESFA-funded provision would not be suitable. If the provision is not regulated or subject to any other external quality assurance regime you must also set out how you will ensure the quality assurance of the provision. In the main we would expect this to be through a process such as [recognising and recording progress and achievement](#).

4) The proposal must correspond to one or more of the categories of interest for the Fund:

- Delivery on a more flexible or convenient timetable
- Making online or blended learning work for adults
- Delivery outside the classroom
- Delivery methods that allow for caring responsibilities and for returning to the labour market

5) Proposals must demonstrate that there is employer support for the project in at least one of these ways:

- Letters of support for the project proposal (rather than for the qualifications being delivered) from at least five employers that are representative of the particular occupational area the project relates to.<sup>3</sup>
- One or more employers are among the organisations included as contributors to the project.

6) Proposals must show that the courses chosen are economically valuable to learners and the wider economy. (For the purpose of this fund, criteria for which courses are considered 'economically valuable' are included in Annex B).

7) Proposals must provide a clear and robust costings plan, which demonstrates how the project would use money in a way that promotes economy, effectiveness and efficiency. The plans must:

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<sup>3</sup> No more than two of these letters can be from sole-traders and micro-businesses (businesses employing fewer than ten members of staff), and, where the project is geographically specific, each employer must operate within the geographical area that the learning is to be delivered.

- State the requested sum of funding, broken down by development and delivery costs, giving a clear rationale for why this amount has been requested.
- Provide details of any other funding sources for the project.
- Include a clear breakdown of how the project budget will be allocated, to which organisations and for what activities. This applies for both the requested funding and any project funding from other sources.
- Demonstrate that you have taken appropriate steps to ‘sense-check’ the costing plan.
- Record the key assumptions made as part of the plan, and the key risks that need to be mitigated to ensure that spend is kept to the level estimated.
- Give details of the expected number of learners to be delivered to, and the expected cost per learner.

8) Proposals must provide include a plan for how organisations will monitor delivery. This should include details of what data can be gathered (or failing that, could be easily gathered by the external research organisation). Further detail of what a monitoring plan should cover can be found in paragraphs 13 and 14 of the main body of the specification.

9) Proposals must show that relevant Awarding Organisation(s) have given their approval for their qualifications to be delivered in a non-standard way through the project. Written confirmation from the AOs should be attached to the proposal submission.

10) Proposals must give details of the key risks to the project that have been identified, and explain what steps will be taken to mitigate them.

## **Stage 2 – excellence criteria**

10. Projects that meet the eligibility requirements and minimum criteria will then be scored against the excellence criteria below, based on details about what is expected of projects with regard to each one. Projects will be assigned a raw score against each criterion (specified below), between 0 and 4, to arrive at an overall score between 0 and 24. Each criterion is assigned a specific weighting in terms of its percentage of the overall score, to reflect the relative importance of each one in selecting projects that meet the Fund’s aims.

11. With the exception of the ‘Value for Money’ criterion (see paragraphs 18 and 19), raw scores will be assigned based on how convincingly it explains how the project will meet the expectations of each criterion:

- Score of 0 – proposal fails to address how it will meet expectations set by the criterion
- Score of 1 – proposal fails to meet the expectations set by the criterion in any substantial aspect
- Score of 2 – proposal meets some of the expectations set by the criterion
- Score of 3 – proposal meets the expectations set by the criterion
- Score of 4 – proposal surpasses the expectations set by the criterion

12. We will assess the extent to which the application demonstrates each of the following:

## **Deliverability**

20% of overall score

13. Proposals are expected to describe how the project will be delivered and demonstrate that there are the appropriate processes to ensure it can be delivered in a way that meets all of its aims and outcomes. This can be done through, for example:

- Clear and convincing explanation of how the project will be managed and delivered
- Evidence that the organisation or group possesses the expertise and capacity to deliver this particular project, such as showing experience of similar activities or projects, or proving a strong track record of relevant training delivery
- Description of planned timeframes for the project
- Description of key risks to the project, and how they would be effectively mitigated
- Any other appropriate means.

## **Flexibility & targeting**

20% of overall score

14. Proposals are expected to explain how their proposed method of delivery provides flexibility and improves accessibility of the provision for adults. In particular, it should be explained how the method meets these requirements in contrast to the method by which the learning is usually delivered. This can be done through, for example:

- Clear description of the delivery method, with focus on the aspects which make it more flexible and/or accessible than other methods
- Evidence which suggests that adults are more likely to engage with the described method than with traditional approaches to delivery
- Evidence that the described method of delivery is not widely practiced in the FE sector when delivering to adults
- Any other appropriate means.

15. Relatedly, they must also specify the target groups at whom the delivery method would be aimed, give convincing reasons for that choice, and demonstrate a practical approach for reaching those groups. This can be done through, for example:

- An explanation of why the delivery method is suited specifically to the needs of those groups
- Proposals for communication and marketing activities to reach out to potential learners within those groups and encourage them to enrol
- Proposals for the development of specific messaging which would be used to engage adults within those groups
- Any other appropriate means.

## **Applicability**

15% of overall score

16. Proposals are expected to demonstrate how the delivery method would be transferable to a larger and wider range of providers and adult learners than are included in the project itself. This can be done through, for example:

- The intention that several different providers will be involved in the delivery phase of the project
- An explanation of how the distinctive features of the delivery method are theoretically transferable to a variety of provider models
- Support for the delivery method from providers not directly involved in the project itself, or located in different geographical areas
- Assurances that the method of delivery does not cater to a very specific cohort such as employees of a small number of organisations, or learners living in a very specific geographical location
- Any other appropriate means.

## **Employer support**

15% of overall score

17. In addition to satisfying the minimum criterion relating to employer support (see paragraph 9, no. 5), proposals are expected to give as much evidence as appropriate that there is strong employer support for the proposed method of delivery, providing an assurance that the proposed method of delivery has been 'sense-checked' by the type of employers who demand the skills being taught. This can be done through, for example:

- Clear evidence of commitment from employers to participate in the project, such as through the inclusion of employers in the project partnership or through commitment letters;

- Statement of support from major representative bodies – whether large general employer representatives, sector-specific bodies or LEPs;
- Statements of support from a range of relevant individual employers;
- Any other appropriate means.

## Value for Money

15% of overall score

18. Proposals are expected to demonstrate that providing grant funding for the project represents good value for money. In addition to the requirement in the minimum standard criteria to provide a clear and robust costings plan (see paragraph 9, No. 7) proposals will be scored according to projected cost per learner that the project will deliver to, calculated as:

- The total projected cost of the project (including both the requested grant sum and other funding sources)

divided by

- The estimated number of learners to whom the project will deliver learning during the time period that grant funding is provided (i.e. up until the end of the 2018/19 Financial Year).

19. The full raw score assigned to each project in terms of value for money will therefore represent the estimated cost per learner, relative to all the other project proposals that meet the eligibility requirements and minimum criteria (laid out in paragraphs 5-9).

## Evaluability

15% of overall score

20. Proposals are expected to show that projects are conducive to being robustly evaluated by an external organisation. In addition to the required monitoring plan (see paragraph 9, no. 8), this can be done through, for example:

- The potential to include a control group (i.e. a group of learners undertaking the same provision, but using a standard method of delivery rather than the newly designed one) to compare against the learners receiving the flexibly designed delivery method
- The intention to gather quantitative or qualitative information from learners undertaking the learning, beyond what would normally be gathered as a matter of course
- Any other appropriate means.

## Stage 3 – Overarching considerations

21. After proposals have been assessed and scored against the excellence criteria, officials will take into consideration the overall spread of proposals to be funded when making a recommendation to Ministers. The factors listed below will also be considered when making final decisions about which suite of projects are awarded funding:

- 1) We will consider the spread of projects across a number of different characteristics, including:
  - Geographical location of delivery
  - Delivery method
  - Categories of interest
  - Specific target demographics
  - Level or occupational focus
  - Scale and level of funding requested – we will look to support a mixture of larger and smaller scale projects.

The highest scoring proposals based on the excellence criteria will be assessed for whether collectively they provide a sufficient spread across the six characteristics listed above, and where this is not the case, next-best scoring projects that do contribute to the spread will be prioritised.

- 2) We will take decisions based on overall funding constraints. If there is a high volume of excellent proposals we will need to prioritise to ensure the total money available is allocated in a way that best supports the objectives of the Fund.

## Annex B - Economically valuable courses

1. Proposals must show that the courses chosen are economically valuable to learners and the wider economy. In particular, we want to ensure that projects do not centre around low-value learning which does not tend to lead to positive destinations for those undertaking it.

2. We will use the following proxies to judge whether a course has sufficient economic value:

- It is a basic English, maths, or digital course falling between Entry Level 1, and Level 2, and eligible for ESFA funding.

OR

- It has a sustained positive destination rate of 60% or above for 2013/14 (or, where 2013/14 data is not available, for 2012/13).<sup>4</sup>

Or both of the above.

3. For learning for which destination rate data is not available for either 2012/13 or 2013/14, we will consider on a case-by-case basis other evidence that the proposals can provide which demonstrates that the learning tends to produce positive outcomes for its learners, with regard to employment, progression, wages and/or further learning.

4. Courses still need to meet the eligibility conditions laid out in the 'decisions process' section of the specification.

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[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/567620/Outcome\\_Based\\_Success\\_Measures\\_-\\_Qualifications\\_Summary\\_Tables.xlsx](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/567620/Outcome_Based_Success_Measures_-_Qualifications_Summary_Tables.xlsx)



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Reference: DFE-20014-2017



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