

SLC Disabled Student Stakeholder Group

02.06.2020 Note to cascade

Department for Education Update

The COVID-19 crisis and associated policy work continued to take priority.

Concerns were raised by members about remote diagnostic assessments, but it was clarified that students were not expected to also provide full SpLD diagnostic assessments to SLC. The priority was to ensure that students could access the support they needed. An informed decision had been made to allow remote assessments as a temporary measure. This pragmatic approach was welcomed, and may be extended if there was a need for it.

Evaluations of Need (EoN) will be accepted until 31st August 2020, and this would be kept under review based on the evolving situation. EoNs should be performed where students could not access face-to-face assessments. SASC had published new guidance on assessment practices.

Clarity was requested on evidence requirements for evaluations of need and non-SpLD assessments. Members were advised that students should submit any evidence they had as a starting point, and details of acceptable evidence could be found in both stakeholder and student FAQs. The age of any evidence would be considered on the basis of the individual application. A referral letter did not confirm diagnosis, but only that the referral had been made.

Confusion over who could perform evaluations of need would be clarified in a forthcoming SLC document, and was addressed in existing SASC guidance.

It was confirmed that DSAs could not be used to fund tinted lenses for students affected by visual stress. Concerns were raised around perceived insufficient consultation prior to this being decided. This was a policy decision, and originally the funding of these lenses had gone against the then existing DSAs policy.

No update was available on the previous toll charges issue.

SLC Update

Year-on-year comparison showed SLC's performance to be extremely encouraging, especially under COVID-19. The transition to remote working had been broadly successful. Volumes of eligibility levels and of all application types and had risen. Further data on applications by disability type would be provided at the August DSSG meeting.

Significantly more DSA2 letters had been issued for 2020/21 students. Needs assessments were being worked in two working days, and volumes of invoices being received were on a par year-on-year. Invoices could now be submitted to SFE by email. Volumes of application and needs assessments had both risen, with invoices covering all support types.

Some HEPs were not submitting any invoices due to remote working, as staff did not have the equipment to do so at home. Feedback on any such challenges was welcome. SLC contact lines were open slightly shorter than under standard operational circumstances. Email channels were encouraged as the primary medium for non-urgent queries. Digital invoice remittance continued to be developed, and SLC hoped to be able to start testing in the near future. Digital evidence upload for customers had been launched.

Discussions on the AT tender award had been paused until 31 July 2020.

Can proposed changes meet needs?

This discussion addressed recommendations around DSAs support and its funding raised in the SLC Tailored Review, including the suggestion that it be paid directly to HEPs. Under the current system, the student received and managed the funding but guidelines and mechanisms to audit this support were felt to be insufficient.

The Tailored Review had been published under the previous government, and the new government's focus was necessarily the COVID-19 pandemic. The sector would be informed should any changes be due to be implemented.

There had been no formal advice to the sector to confirm any actions or outcomes from the Tailored Review. A vision piece was suggested by DSSG members, and the idea was welcomed, with an update on its progress to be brought to the next DSSG meeting.

NMH Audit Solution and Complaints Procedure

The interim arrangements had been outlined in the SSIN issued in November 2019.

Concerns raised would be taken into consideration as new procedures were drawn up. The Department was open to making adaptations as appropriate to improve efficiency.

Reassurances were required around the provision of quality support under the pandemic. Any instances of insufficient NMH support should be raised first with the NMHP, and then with SLC if necessary. Procedures were also in place for whistle blowing. SLC was aware of student concerns around NMH provision, but complaint volumes were low.

Many students did not know what to expect in terms of support, and the suggestion of a student charter was tabled to resolve this. It was suggested that a working group could be created to develop one, using the ADSHE student charter as a starting point.

AOB

- Concerns were raised about the potential for hardware supply shortages as courses were due to begin in September, but no actual supply chain issues had been reported to date.
- Ergonomic assessments could not be performed remotely. SLC had received representations on both sides of the argument, but that there was no consistent message that could be promoted at this stage. Contributions from group members were welcome. The easing of lockdown restrictions may eventually make face-to-face assessments possible again.
- OfS briefing notes on supporting students and providers had been published, with further briefing notes on Disabled Students due by the end of June.

Next meeting date: Tuesday 25 August 2020 venue and format to be confirmed.