Case Studies- Good practice administration of Discretionary Learner Support (DLS)

Introduction

In January 2014, the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) commissioned Ecorys to create digital case studies demonstrating good practice in the administration of the Discretionary Learner Support (DLS) fund.

The case studies were commissioned following recommendations set out in the 'Review of the Adult Discretionary Learner Support Fund for the Further Education Sector' (***https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dscretionary-learner-support-review***) for BIS to encourage providers to share and learn from effective practice concerning the administration of the scheme.

These digital case studies feature different aspects of the administration of DLS. It includes examples that demonstrate:

- Streamlined and low cost administration and budgeting of the fund
- Innovative approaches used to support learners in need
- Clear and well publicised criteria for DLS distribution of the fund
- A targeted communications approach to support those learners most in need
- An evaluation strategy to determine learner progression
- Strategies that limit spend on DLS for fees.

The colleges featured in these case studies are:

- **Leeds City College**
- **Newcastle College**
- **Solihull College**
- **Harlow College**
- **Plumpton College**

For any enquiries about the brochure please contact Paul Robinson - ***Paul.ROBINSON@bis.gsi.gov.uk***
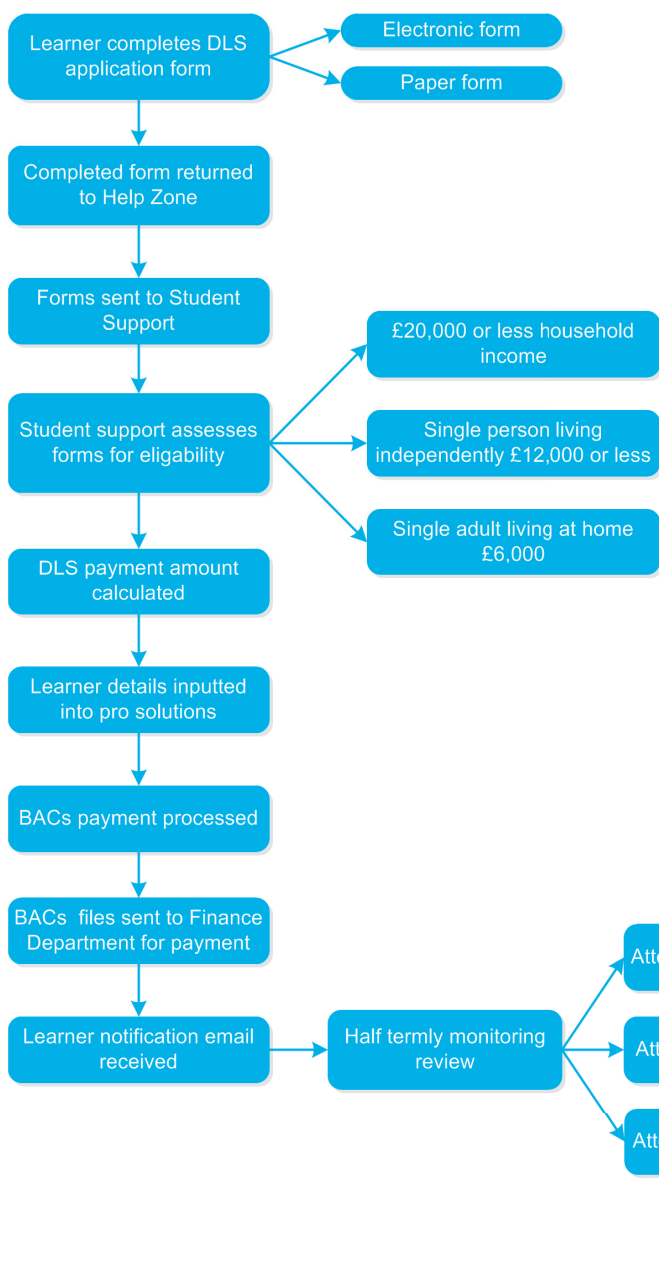
Leeds City College

Leeds City College is an FE establishment that offers a diverse curriculum to more than 40,000 students. They offer courses in almost all subject areas including full and part-time, academic and vocational qualifications. These include Basic skills, Apprenticeships, 'A' Levels and Foundation Degrees. The College operates out of six main campuses – Horsforth, Joseph Priestley, Keighley, Park Lane, Technology and Printworks. It has a National Skills Academy status for Community Sport Enterprise, Creative & Cultural Skills, Food & Drink Manufacture, Hospitality, Retail, Financial Services and Sports & Fitness, as well as accolades for Printing and Computer Technology.

Leeds City College has an annual turnover of over **£90m** and employs more than **1,550 staff**. In 2011/12 the percentage of qualifications successfully achieved in the full year for FE long courses was 78.5%. The College provides DLS support to approximately **2,600** students aged 19+.

http://www.leedscitycollege.ac.uk/

The diagram below illustrates the key processes linked to the administration of the College's DLS funds:

DLS processes and criteria for distribution of funding:

Learners at Leeds City College are eligible for DLS support based on their income threshold and living arrangements, the criteria used are as follows:

- Household income of £20,000 or below
- Single person living independently household income £12,000
- Single learner living within someone's household income £6,000.

The College prioritises learners on income assessed benefits or Working Tax Credits. Other criteria taken into account to calculate individual awards include:

- Number of days and hours of the course
- The type and level of costs likely to be incurred on the course, for example help towards the costs of protective clothing and footwear, or help towards additional books or basic art materials
- Students actual travel needs based on distance to college

Students are supported with additional costs associated with their course or progression activities such as trips, visits, UCAS application fees and costs of auditions and travel to higher education interviews.

Flowchart:

- Learner completes DLS application form → Electronic form / Paper form
- Completed form returned to Help Zone
- Forms sent to Student Support
- Student support assesses forms for eligibility → £20,000 or less household income / Single person living independently £12,000 or less / Single adult living at home £6,000
- DLS payment amount calculated
- Learner details inputted into pro solutions
- BACs payment processed
- BACs files sent to Finance Department for payment
- Learner notification email received
- Half termly monitoring review → Attendance above 85% → Payment generated
- Attendance of 70-84% → Learner informed that attendance is being reviewed and will need to improve
- Attendance below 70% → Referred to tutor, payment (excluding travel) can be stopped or reduced , appeals process explained

Raising learners awareness of the eligibility criteria for DLS

The eligibility criterion for DLS is informed by the Skills Funding Agency Funding rules and the thresholds set by other providers. While the Agency's Funding rules offers some flexibility for providers, it also provides a structure to the College's approach to student support.

Leeds College uses a range of approaches to make learners aware of the criteria for receiving DLS. Information is provided throughout admissions; interview and enrolment process to ensure learners are aware of the funds and are able to access financial help as early as possible. Approaches used include:

- The College's intranet
- Posters
- Leaflets
- Student services attending learner events
- DLS Guidance documents
- Student induction and tutorial resources

Learners can access 'Help Zones' situated around the college where they can pick up and return completed DLS forms, and receive advice from staff on the application process. There is also a 'Help Zone' area of the student intranet with email support.

Vulnerable learners such as care leavers and young parents are supported using Personal Support workers. These students who are usually supported using the Vulnerable Guaranteed Bursary at the age of 16-18 are identified at the age of 19 when they progress further within the College and supported with higher DLS payments.

The College has recently introduced an electronic DLS application form along side the paper based version which has reduced staff time in processing learners' application forms. The form can be used by 19+ students accessing support with travel or course costs. The form is accessed through the student intranet and is pre-populated with the learners' information already available on the College's database. The learners complete the rest of the form before printing, filling in their bank details and submitting the form at the Help Zone.

Strategies used to raise awareness of DLS processes with members of staff

A range of strategies are used by Leeds College to raise awareness of DLS and the administration processes linked to the fund with their staff, these include:

- The staff intranet;
- Staff road shows; and
- Monthly management meetings.

Staff are also provided with an information sheet (illustrated below) to support them in the administration processes.

LEARNER SUPPORT FUND APPLICATION PROCESS 2013-14 – STAFF INFORMATION SHEET

Student fills in form template on Student Intranet (OR COLLECTS A PAPER FORM FROM THE HELP ZONE)	Student brings completed form to Help Zone	Form sent to Student Finance Administrators	Form assessed, student informed and award made
A form template will be on the Student Intranet. Student needs to be enrolled and have a student log-in and be familiar with Student Intranet. Form will be accessed from 'Help Zone' button.	Student to visit Help Zone or Community Base Reception to hand in their completed form.	At Keighley forms are kept in the Help Zone. For all Leeds Campuses send forms to Enfield.	The forms will be assessed; if successful payment will be made to bank account. Students will be informed of the outcome of their application to their college email.
From the student's id number and information on ProSolutions the form will be prepopulated with some of the student's details. Either the 16-18 or 19+ template will show. There is a prompt on 16-18 form about Vulnerable Guaranteed Bursary and a prompt on the 19+ form for 24+ Loan Learner Bursary. Form is to be printed by the student, a copy will be sent to their Student email account, so they can print when they have access to a printer. **PAPER FORMS FOR THE FUNDS WILL ALSO BE AVAILABLE FROM THE HELP ZONE.** There are some forms that have only been created as paper versions; these include forms for Fees, Childcare, Residentials and Emergency Funding.	Student needs to bring; • Printed signed form • Household Income evidence • Evidence of Residency if requested • Bank Account details • Evidence of status for Guaranteed Bursary • Evidence of 24+ Loan if requested Student to provide photocopies of their evidence. If original evidence is handed in we cannot return this at a later date.	Use Yellow folders labelled: **Student Finance Team E20, Enfield Centre** Please don't send forms and documents in separate envelopes, or to named people in the team. Forms to be sent at least once a day.	Students need to be familiar with email and know where to access from Student Intranet. Different contact arrangements can only be made at student's own request. First payments will be made to students' bank account based on a check that they are currently enrolled. All further payments will be made on periodic attendance checks. **Where attendance falls below 90% payments may be reduced or suspended.** There will be an appeal process for students when their payment has not being made; tutors need to be in support of the appeal for payment to be reinstated. Appeal forms are available at Help Zones.
In the first stage of the on-line system a Form Template is available on the Student Intranet to be completed and printed. The form is **not** sent electronically to Student Finance Team. The student brings the printed form to the Help Zone. Development work will be on-going to create a form that is filled in on-line, that is populated via ProSolution and also adds information into ProSolution.	Forms to be checked to ensure they are fully completed, evidence should be securely stapled to form. Student Finance Administrators will have hand-in sessions at main campuses. At other centres support will be needed from Help Zone Teams to take in the forms.	Forms will be date stamped on receipt by Student Finance Administrators. Forms will be kept in date order and sorted into type of application; Guaranteed Vulnerable Bursaries will be prioritised. All other applications will be assessed in date order.	Our service standard states that: **Fully completed application forms will be processed within one calendar month.** For Guaranteed Vulnerable Bursaries we estimate one week between receiving form and making a payment.

The College provides DLS support to approximately 2,600 students aged 19+

ILR Reporting

DLS information is captured using the College's Student Services database 'ProSolutions'. This database is linked to the ILR hence the information captured can be directly transferred onto the ILR database. This process ensures that ILR reporting of DLS learners is captured efficiently and reduces duplication of data entry. An example of the database is demonstrated below:
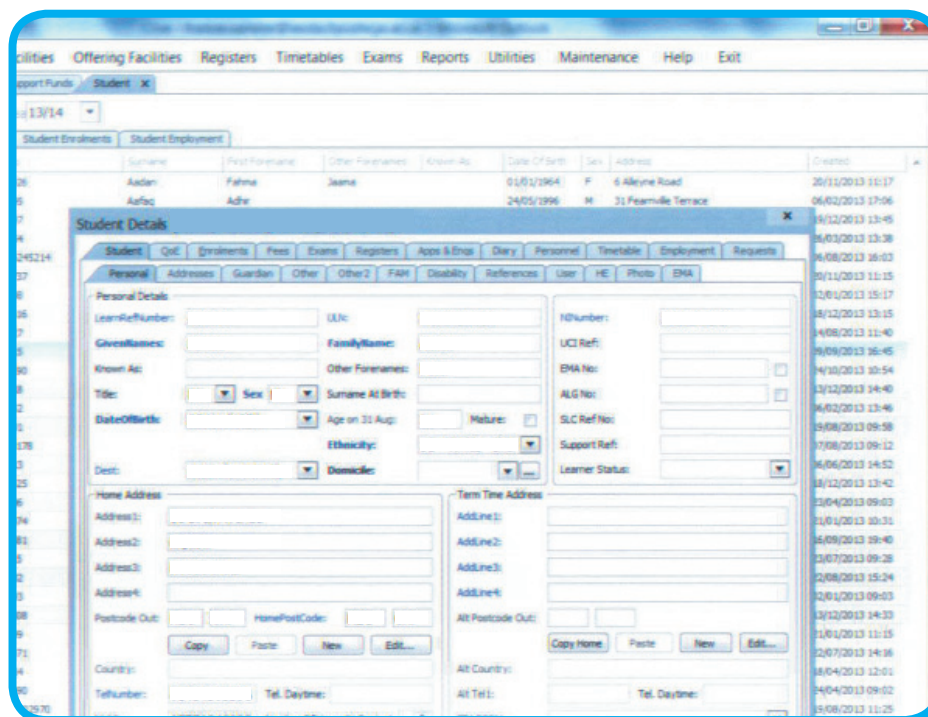
Evaluation strategy used to determine the progression of learners receiving DLS

Monitoring the progress of learners in receipt of DLS

The College monitors the progress of learners in receipt of DLS on a half termly basis; this determines whether or not a student will continue to receive support. An aspirations attendance level of 90% is set for learners, and all communication refers to this aspirational level of attendance. The process involves the following:

- Student Support staff run monitoring reports to identify attendance levels
- Payments are made to students whose attendance is at 85% or above
- Emails / Letters are sent to students whose attendance is between 70-84% informing them that their attendance levels are being monitored and will need to be improved if they wish to continue to receive DLS funding
- Where attendance is lower than 70%, the student's case is reviewed by a tutor as part of the appeals process. However, the College ensures that it continues to provide the learner with funding for travel during the review / appeals process to avoid making the situation worse.

The individual circumstances of the learner are also taken into account where attendance levels are found to be low, with funding provided in some instances for a week whilst the learner's case is reviewed. The college recognises that attendance levels can be affected by pre-existing and on-going financial hardship and as such, flexibility and discretion is shown when setting levels of attendance at which payments are paid or withdrawn. Attendance levels are therefore reviewed on a case by case basis depending on the learner's circumstances.

Assessing the impact of DLS on learners

The College carries out a learner survey to explore the impact of DLS on their personal circumstances. It also reviews where DLS payments have been made including the types of courses and college locations of learners receiving DLS. The College has also in the past carried out a comparison research on the impact of students with bus passes compared to those without to explore the extent to which travel support affects attendance levels.

Strategy for limiting spend on DLS

Placing limits on the funding

The College has placed a cap of £7,000 on the amount of funding that can be claimed for DLS for childcare costs. This cap is informed by Care to Learn budgets and the Childcare Element of Working Tax Credits. Travel costs are calculated on the most economical local travel that learners can use to travel to College.

The income thresholds are in place to ensure the College stays within the budget while ensuring that support benefits students in the lowest income households.

Administration costs

The new DLS student electronic form introduced by the College cuts down administration costs linked to the processing DLS funds. It contains a number of pre populated fields linked to the learner's personal details already available in the college database.

Learners complete the rest of the form before printing, filling in their bank details and submitting the form at one of the College's Help Zones along with evidence of household income and residency evidence where required.

Having these pre populated fields reduces the time Student Services staff have to spend chasing students for missing fields or checking responses that are unclear or contain incorrect information.
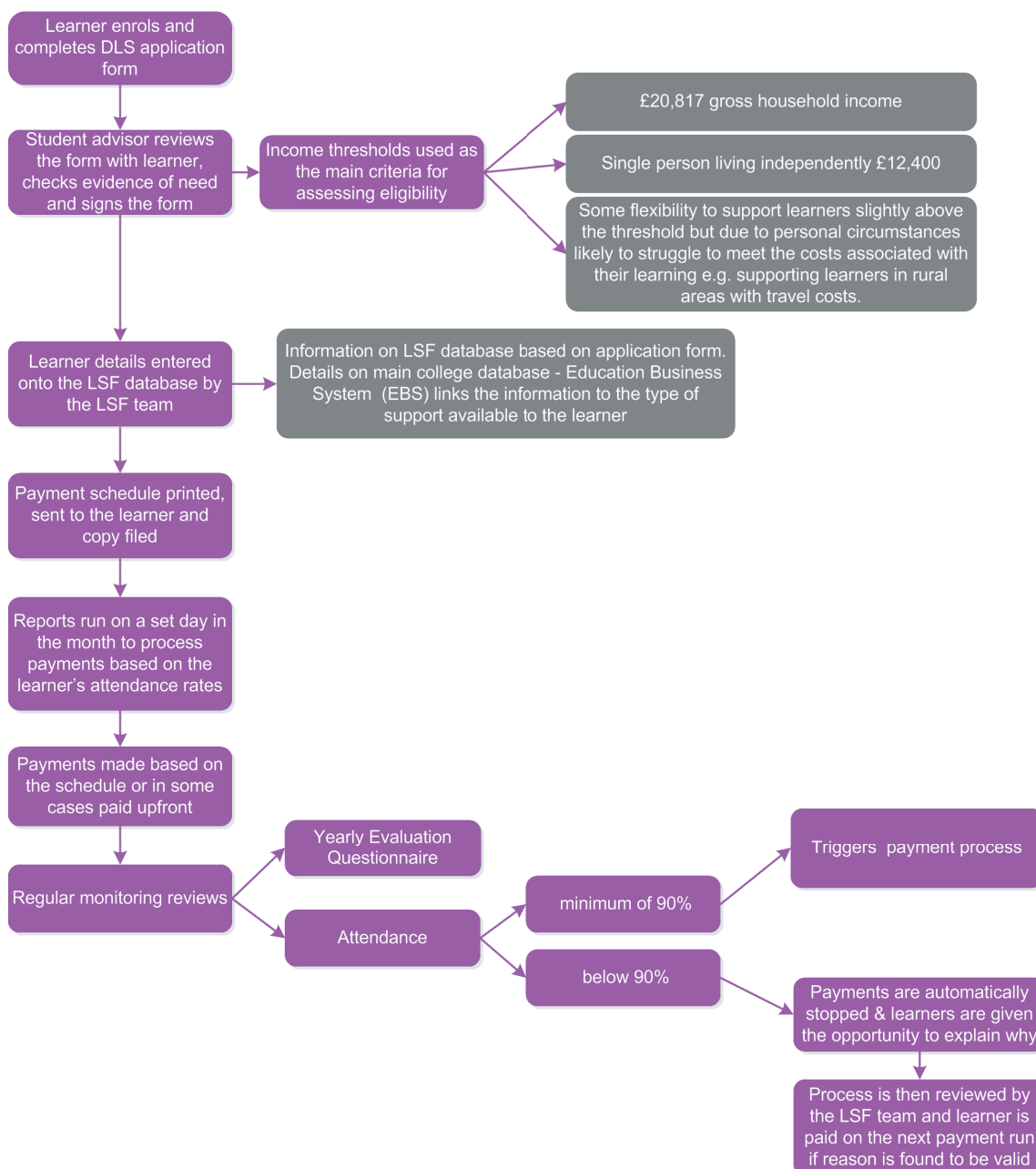
Newcastle College

Newcastle College is a Further and Higher Education institution which offers a wide range of flexible courses to over 16,201 learners. The College provides Discretionary Learner Support (DLS) to approximately 2,300 learners. The percentage of qualifications successfully achieved in the full year 2012/13 for FE long courses for students aged 19+ in the College was 92%.

In 2011, the Newcastle College Corporation was awarded Foundation Degree Awarding Powers (FDAP); the College therefore validates its own Foundation degrees.

Newcastle College's Student Services department holds the Matrix Award, a national quality standard used for organisations who deliver information, advice and guidance services about learning and work.

http://www.ncl-coll.ac.uk/

The diagram below illustrates the key processes linked to the administration of the College's DLS funds:

DLS processes and criteria for distribution of funding:

Newcastle College's DLS processes are based on number of processes as illustrated in the diagram above.

In addition to the criteria set out in the Skills Agency's Funding rules, the College uses income thresholds as the main criteria for assessing eligibility for DLS support. This is based on a gross family household income of £20, 817 or £12,400 for a single independent person. The College also builds into the process some flexibility to support learners who are slightly above the threshold but due to personal circumstances are likely to struggle to meet the costs associated with their learning. For example, supporting learners who live in rural areas and have to travel some distance to attend College. It also supports learners with childcare support, this is restricted to learners on 10 or more guided learning hours.

Newcastle College attaches a minimum attendance rate of 90% as a condition for learners who receive DLS support. This condition is attached to support related to travel and material or kit costs but not to childcare because of the contracts that learners receiving support in this area have with their childcare providers. However, the College does monitor the attendance of learners who receive childcare support.

Raising learners awareness of the eligibility criteria for DLS

Learners are made aware of the criteria for DLS through a number of routes:

- The College's 'Financial Support for Adults Application form' includes information on the eligibility criteria
- Learners are made aware of the criteria during the College's main enrolment event in August
- The College's website and intranet system sets out the financial support available to learners
- IAG sessions with student advisors.

The College also uses social media such as Twitter and Facebook to raise learners' awareness of DLS, Social media is also used to provide any updates on the funds available.

Newcastle College works closely with learning mentors to ensure that those they support, particularly vulnerable learners or those struggling financially, are aware of the financial help available from the student services. These mentors in some cases act as intermediaries for learners who find it difficult to ask for financial help.

Strategies used to raise awareness of DLS processes with members of staff

The LSF team and student advisors hold regular meetings to discuss updates and any changes made to the funding rules. The team also hold meetings with different schools within the College to raise staff's awareness of the funds available to support their learners.

Information about DLS funds is also sent in a cross college communication bulletin called 'Insight'.

ILR Reporting

Newcastle College has a central team that manages all ILR returns for the different schools within the College; this streamlines the general process and makes it more efficient. The College's MI systems are also linked thus saving time with respect to processing ILR returns.

The Agency's funding rules inform how the College manages its ILR returns. The College has an efficient ILR returns process – the MI team runs ILR returns every two weeks. They also have a data cycle which runs on a monthly basis and run updates ahead of these monthly sessions.

The College has developed a bespoke database called the 'Learner Support Fund (LSF)' database which supports the administration functions linked to DLS. The LSF database is web based. It has been designed using a number of rules to determine the type of financial support that a learner is entitled to.

The database is linked to the College's main database Education Business System (EBS) which holds information on all learners in the College. It draws on this information (e.g. age and postcode) plus data entered by the LSF team (i.e. income and benefit status) and works out the financial support that the learner is entitled to. For example, using a learner's postcode details, the LSF database through a link to Google map will work out how far the learner lives from the College, and, based on this information, calculate the travel allowance the learner can claim. Similarly, based on information in the database, such as the income threshold of the learner, links are made to the type of DLS support that the learner is entitled to (i.e. hardship, material costs, travel), and payments that need to be made to the learner.

The system has also been designed to run a number of checks as follows:

- **Enrolment –** the database can be used to check whether the learner has actually enrolled onto a course
- **Entitlement amount** – based on the information drawn from the EBS and entered by the LSF team, the system creates the DLS entitlement amount for the learner
- Attendance - as the database is linked to the College's electronic register, it is used to calculate the attendance rate of learners. The College uses this information to determine whether the learner has fulfilled the criteria for receiving DLS.

The LSF database also supports the ILR reporting process, its link to the EBS (the main database used to submit ILR data to the Information Authority's system) ensures that the MI team can draw on this to run reports on the number of learners accessing DLS.

These reports are checked by the LSF team and submitted as part of the ILR reporting process.

Evaluation strategy used to determine the progression of learners receiving DLS

Monitoring the progress of learners in receipt of DLS

Newcastle College monitors the retention and achievement of learners who receive DLS funds on a regular basis. The College also asks learners to complete an evaluation questionnaire, this is is rolled out on a yearly basis to those receiving Learner Support Funds.

The questionnaire explores learners' views on the application process and the extent to which the support has enabled them to complete their studies. For those who withdraw in the middle of a course, the questionnaire explores reasons why. Findings from the questionnaire are discussed with the Learner Services Director and used to improve the service.

Other strategies used to monitor progress include:

• Having regular conversations with student advisors who support learners struggling with their learning; and

• Following up with learners who have withdrawn from a course.

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These reports are checked by the LSF team and submitted as part of the ILR reporting process.

Assessing the impact of DLS on learners

The College uses findings from the evaluation questionnaire to assess the impact of DLS on their learners. For example, it has recently changed its travel mileage restriction from 3 miles to 2, and increased the daily travel allowance paid to learners based on feedback received from last year's evaluation. They found that learners who lived just below that mileage were finding it difficult to travel to College.

Strategy for limiting spend on DLS

Placing limits on the funding

The income threshold criteria set by the College for distributing DLS funds ensures that funds are used to target learners who are most in need. The College also places a cap on the amount of funds paid for childcare, travel and hardship or material costs. However, student advisors have the flexibility to use their discretion to support vulnerable learners who may be above the criteria but due to personal circumstances are struggling financially.

For travel, the College uses a mileage restriction to determine how much a learner receives. Support for childcare is based on the number of guided learning hours of the learner concerned.

Administration costs

Newcastle College's LSF database ensures that administration functions linked to DLS are carried out efficiently thus minimising costs. It has a number of advantages:

- It manages all DLS payments for learners, and through its link with EBS identifies the ILR codes for the learners. This information is used by the MI team to submit returns on the number of learners receiving DLS support

- It works out the DLS payments that a learner is entitled to for that year which allows the LSF team to determine spend versus budget and forecasts

- The LSF budget is attached to the database, the system therefore flags it up when the College has gone over their budget, hence, it helps to keep the College within budget

- The LSF database is linked to different schools within the College, every school is therefore able to see how much money is spent on their learners

- The system has a built in process that monitors learners attendance, this helps to determine whether or not the learner is eligible to continue to receive DLS support

- It acts as a second check and eliminates errors, without it, the College would have to rely on manual checks

- It provides a structure to what they do, who get's paid and when

- It is a bespoke database and allows the College to tailor it to their needs

Solihull College

Solihull College is an FE institution that offers a wide range of professional and vocational courses to more than 12,000 students. The College has two main campuses – the Blossomfield Campus in central Solihull and the Woodlands Campus in north Solihull. It has annual turnover of over £35m and employs more than 1,000 staff. The percentage of qualifications successfully achieved in 2011/12 for FE long courses in the College was 83%. The College provides +19 DLS support to approximately 500 students.

The College offers courses in a range of subject areas including full and part-time, higher education courses and bespoke employment training. These include vocational courses, foundation level programmes, apprenticeships and traineeships. It also offers a variety of university level programmes including Higher National Certificates (HNCs), Higher National Diplomas (HNDs), foundation degrees, top-up degrees, bachelor's degrees and master's degrees, including qualifications accredited by Oxford Brookes, Coventry and Warwick universities.

Solihull College has a number of Academies including the Aerospace Centre of Excellence, the Peter Jones Enterprise Academy, IT Academy, Retail Academy, Hair & Beauty Academy, Health & Social Care Academy and Sport Academies (football, golf, netball, basketball).

http://www.solihull.ac.uk/

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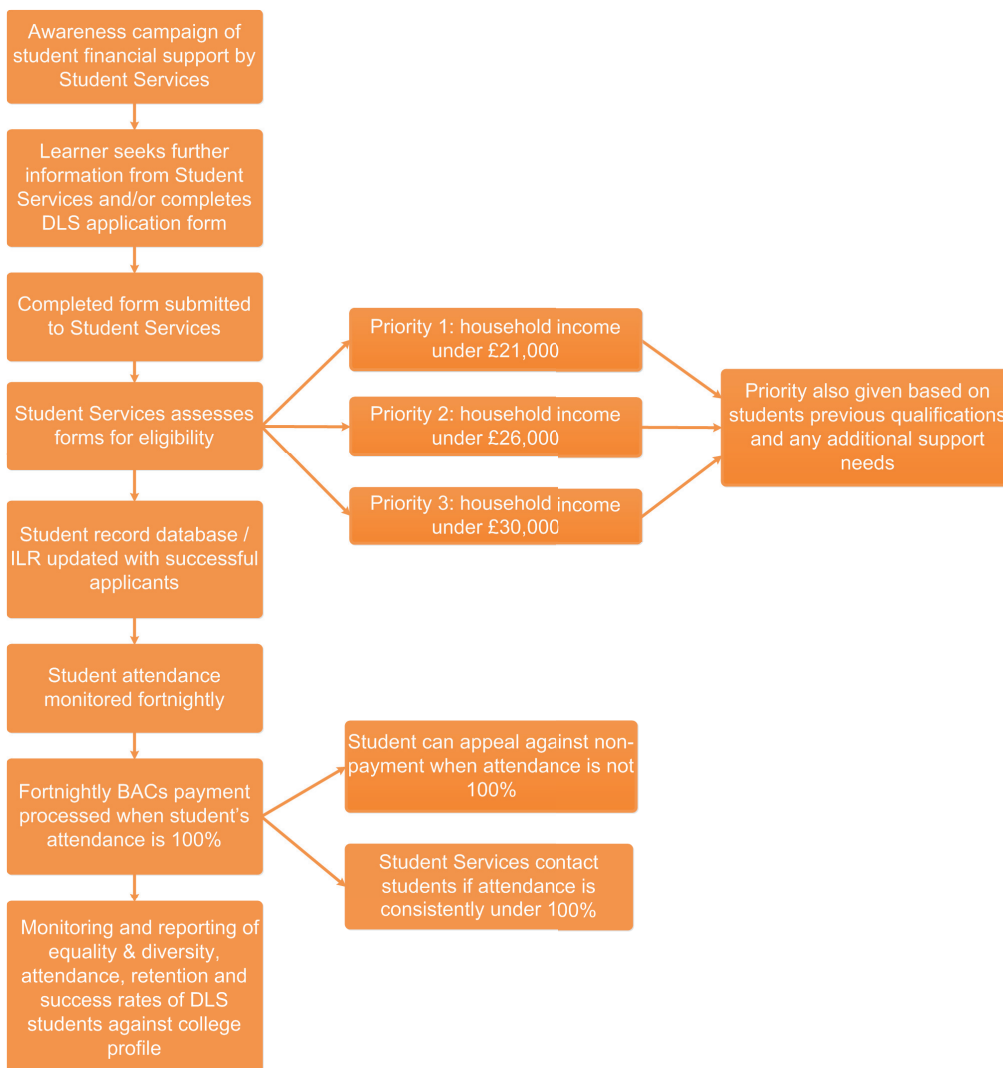
DLS processes and criteria for distribution of funding:

The College's eligibility criterion for DLS is informed by the Skills Funding Agency's funding rules; it however offers some flexibility within these rules to ensure that it suits the range and profile of its learners, these include introducing rules around priority groups, previous qualifications and learners with additional support needs as set out below.

Solihull College has recently introduced the following three-tier system eligibility criteria for DLS based on household income:

- Priority 1 – household income under £21,000 (awarded financial help on submission of a successful application)
- Priority 2 – household income under £26,000 (awarded financial help after October half term - subject to sufficient funds remaining)
- Priority 3 – household income under £30,000 (awarded financial help after all eligible applications from priority 1 and 2 have been funded - subject to sufficient funds remaining).

Previous qualification levels are also taken into consideration, for example, students studying for their first Level 2 or Level 3 course; students progressing from a Level 2 to a Level 3 course within their chosen career path; and students studying on an Adult Basic Education course.

Further priority is given to learners that have an additional support need such as lone parents, those in care, care leavers, learners with learning difficulties or disabilities, ex-offenders and members of the travelling community.

Raising learners awareness of the eligibility criteria for DLS

Solihull College uses a range of approaches to make learners aware of the criteria for receiving DLS, these include:

- The Student Hub - the college's intranet site for students
  Click here to visit the hub
- Student financial support booklet - available online, and displayed and distributed by the college
- Poster campaign and digital display screens around college
- Direct mail shots
- Student financial support talks by student services at learner open days, events and the Principal's welcome talks.

The College's Student Services recently reviewed its student financial support booklet to make sure the rules and criteria were clear, transparent, and easy to understand.

As part of the process it invited course and schools representatives elected as members of the student body to provide feedback, and, based on the feedback, reviewed the information provided in ***the booklet***.

Strategies used to raise awareness of DLS processes with members of staff

A range of strategies are used by Solihull College to raise awareness of DLS and the administration processes linked to the fund with their staff, these include:

- Delivering student financial support presentations at the College's annual personal tutor conferences;
- Providing all personal tutors with copies of the student's financial support booklets; and
- Providing regular updates to heads of school and senior directors at central management team (CMT) meetings.

Most learners in Solihull College have personal tutors. Student Services work with the personal tutors to raise their awareness about the range of financial support available to the learners they support, these tutors are the first point of contact for learners. They provide support to those who are struggling financially and act as intermediaries for learners who find it embarrassing to ask directly for financial support from Student Services.

ILR Reporting

ILR reporting of the DLS fund is managed by the College's Management Information System (MIS) team. The College uses a student record database 'QLS v4' which is linked to ILR. This makes ILR reporting simple and efficient; as it is a shared database it also removes any duplication errors.

The College's MIS team is responsible for completing the official returns and ensures that the ILR information is up to date. The student finance team have access to the learner record database and update and review the details of learners who receive DLS on a regular basis. An example of this database is illustrated below.

Evaluation strategy used to determine the progression of learners receiving DLS

Monitoring the progress of learners in receipt of DLS

Solihull College monitors attendance levels of learners who receive DLS on a fortnightly basis to track their progress. Learners are paid costs related to DLS on a fortnightly basis and only receive payments if their attendance record is 100% the previous fortnight. There is however a process where learners can appeal against a non-payment. Learners whose attendance record consistently fall below 100% during these fortnightly checks are followed up by Student Services to explore whether this is due to a change in their personal circumstances.

Attendance for childcare payments is set at a slightly lower rate at 90%; this is done in the interest of the childcare providers to ensure some stability in the income they receive for the services provided to their learners. With learners whose attendance fall below 90%, the College formally writes to both the childcare provider and the learner to explain that the College is unable to pay the childcare fees for the period in question as per the childcare agreement entered into at the start of the funding, and that the fees will now revert to the student. The College also includes information on the appeals process in the student's letters.

Assessing the impact of DLS on learners

Monitoring strategies used by Solihull College for learners receiving DLS support include:

- Running DLS reports on a regular basis to ensure the fund is used to support the correct target groups (for e.g. learners with disabilities and learning difficulties, from widening participation post code, age group, ethnicity, and gender).
- Using Learner surveys to gain feedback from both successful and unsuccessful DLS applicants to explore their overall experience of the process, speed of response, level of support provided, awareness of support and impact of financial support.

Each year, Solihull College also conducts a review of learners who receive DLS, and benchmarks them against the profile of other learners within the College. One of the key areas the College focuses on as part of this review is the extent to which DLS is supporting learners from widening participation postcodes. Last year, 70% of the College's learners who received DLS came from these widening participation postcodes compared with 39% of the College's learner profile.

The College also analyses the attendance, retention, and the overall success rates of learners who receive DLS against other learners. This enables them to assess the achievement status of learners who receive DLS compared to non-DLS learners to assess the impact of the support.

Strategy for limiting spend on DLS

Placing limits on the funding

The College has placed a range of caps on the amount of funding that can be claimed for DLS which are set out as follows:

- Childcare: maximum of £5,500 per child - the cap is calculated based on average spend on childcare per learner, and number of days students are in college

- Travel: maximum of £550 per learner - based on the cost of a monthly bus pass. Travel support is also dependent on the distance from the college - any student living within a mile radius is not eligible for funding for travel.are in college

Administration costs

Solihull College's in-house student finance database ensures that the administration of DLS funds is carried out efficiently and the costs kept low due to its various functions.

The College also trains their staff to carry out multi-disciplinary roles - for example combining student finance and admission role responsibilities, this helps to keep administration costs low at less busy periods and prevents the need to take on additional temporary staff at busy periods during the year.

Harlow College

Harlow College is an FE institution that offers a wide range of vocational courses to more than 6,000 learners. The College has a number of centres all of which operate from the College's main campus site in Harlow Town Centre; this includes a Sixth Form and Vocation Centre, Adult Learning Centre, Business Development Centre, Journalism Centre and University Centre.

The College offers courses in a range of subject areas such as apprenticeships, foundation studies, A-levels, and vocational courses for 16 to 19 learners and access courses, diplomas, foundation degrees, and bachelor's degrees for 19+ learners. Anglia Ruskin University validates the College's foundation and bachelor degrees.

In 2013/14, Harlow College was awarded an Association of Colleges (AoC) Beacon Award for Innovation in Further Education for outstanding leadership of improvement. The College's Student Services have been awarded the Matrix Standard for Information, Advice and Guidance.

Harlow College has an annual turnover of over £20m and employs more than 500 staff. The percentage of qualifications successfully achieved in 2011/12 for FE was 94%. The College provides DLS support to approximately 100 adult (19+) learners.

http://www.harlow-college.ac.uk/

The diagram below illustrates the key processes linked to the administration of the College's DLS funds.
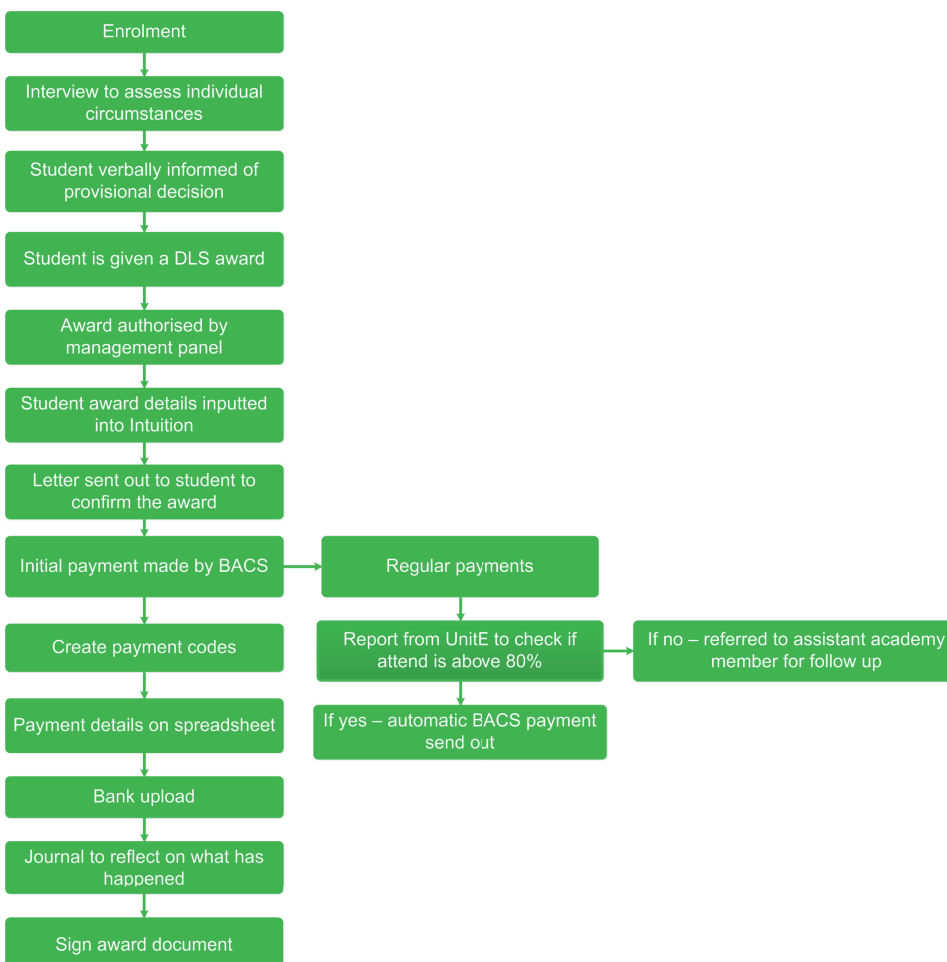
DLS processes and criteria for distribution of funding:

Harlow College uses the following criteria which are informed by the Skills Agency's funding rules to make a judgement on who receives DLS support:

- Income support

- Employment support allowance (income based)

- Housing benefit

- Council tax allowance

- Pension guarantee credit

- Working tax credit with an income below £21,000

- Job seekers allowance and housing benefit/council tax allowance

The College prioritises learners who need childcare support as long as the programme they are undertaking is their first full level 2 or level 3 qualification.

To capture vulnerable learners and hard to reach groups who need financial support, interviews are carried out with every learner that applies to the College in order to understand the applicant's individual circumstances, and a risk form based on these interviews is completed for those likely to have financial difficulties throughout their time at College.

Raising learners awareness of the eligibility criteria for DLS

Harlow College uses a range of approaches to make learners aware of the criteria for receiving DLS, these include:

- ***The College website*** – DLS information and guidance notes

- Open evenings where students can get access to funding information

- Interviews with all prospective students

- Enrolment and induction sessions

- Student services guidance sessions

- Daily open surgeries run by the Student Finance Help desk.

Strategies used to raise awareness of DLS processes with members of staff

A range of strategies are used by Harlow College to raise awareness of DLS and the administration processes linked to the fund with all staff, these include providing information on DLS in *__staff user guide booklets__* (link below) and briefings for those who work in student services, finance and admissions departments.

ILR Reporting

Harlow College's MIS team manages the ILR reporting of learners receiving DLS support using a system called UNIT-e. The College also uses a database called 'Intuition' to capture both hard (e.g. ethnicity, course, contact details) and soft data (e.g. tutors comments on a learner's progress or personal circumstances) on learners who receive DLS. Data from UNITe is migrated into the Intuition database.

Evaluation strategy used to determine the progression of learners receiving DLS

Monitoring the progress of learners in receipt of DLS

Harlow College monitors attendance levels of its learners in receipt of DLS. The bursary team liaises with personal tutors of learners who have an attendance record below 80% to explore reasons why and whether support should be continued or not.

The College also uses an internal flagging system for learners it deems at risk. The flagging system has the following four levels:

- **A:** learner is on track to achieve their qualification
- **B1:** low risk – the College is hopeful that the learner will achieve their qualification with some support
- **B2:** medium risk – the College is providing support, but is uncertain if the learner will achieve qualification or stay with the College
- **B3:** high risk – there are significant risks to the learner and a high chance that the learner will not achieve their qualification or leave the College

The College's flagging system and strategies for early intervention which is used for all learners is regarded as a good practice model, and part of the reason why it received its AoC Beacon Award for Innovation. The College also has an 'At Risk Learners Group' for learners that are at risk of not achieving their qualification or not continuing with their qualification. It identifies learners at risk from teacher referrals and develops strategies with these learners to ensure that they stay on the programme and achieve their qualification.

Harlow College often finds that learners flagged as B1 experience financial difficulties; these learners are often referred to the bursary team for further financial support where relevant. B1-B3 categories make up around 5-10% of students at College at any one time. Based on the College's analysis last year, it supported 300 from dropping out or not achieving their qualification.

Strategy for limiting spend on DLS

Placing limits on the funding

The College places a range of caps on the amount of funding that can be claimed for DLS as follows:

- Childcare: maximum of £4,500 per child – time sheets from the childcare provider are required for all payments after the initial payment

- Travel: Travel support is based on distance – any learner living within a mile radius is not eligible for funding for travel

The College based on its own research discovered that there were Ofsted registered childcare providers that could provide affordable childcare, as a result it reduced its cap on childcare from £5,700 to £4,500 to limit its spend on DLS to ensure that it could provide more learners with childcare support.

Harlow College also has arrangements with local bus companies who subsidise travel costs for their learners. It also encourages learners to apply for discount travel cards from Essex and Herefordshire County Councils.

Administration costs

Harlow College's Intuition database system ensures that all learners receiving DLS are in one system, this makes it easy to track them, streamlines administration processes linked to DLS and irons out inefficiencies likely to make the process a burden to staff.

Plumpton College

Plumpton College is a specialised land-based College of Further and Higher Education institution. It offers programmes for 14-16 year olds through to Diploma courses at level 2 and level 3 Foundation Degree, BSC Degree and Post Graduate levels plus Apprenticeship provision.

The College has a residential accommodation for circa 200 students and participates in the Residential Access Fund.

The College delivers courses in a range of areas including Agriculture, Horticulture, Floristry, Hard Landscaping, Equine, Agricultural & Horticultural Machinery, Animal Care & Veterinary Nursing, Countryside & Game Management, Forestry & Arboriculture, Sports (Outdoor Education), Wine & Viticulture, Blacksmithing and Rural Business Management. Degree courses are provided in association with the University of Brighton.

Plumpton College has a total of approximately 4,000 learners and provides Discretionary Learner Support (DLS) to approximately 300 learners. The percentage of qualifications successfully achieved in the full year 2011/12 for FE long courses for students in the College was 84.2%.

The College's main site is at Plumpton with out-centres at Netherfield (near Battle), Flimwell in East Sussex, Stanmer Park in Brighton and Snowdonia, North Wales.

http://www.plumpton.ac.uk/

DLS processes and criteria for distribution of funding

Plumpton College follows a number of processes with respect to administration of its DLS funds as set out in the diagram below.

The College prioritises DLS support to learners who have a household income of £22,000 or below. It keeps the application for financial support open to help learners whose personal circumstances change during term time. In addition to using household income, it also encourages vulnerable learners such as care leavers, those with a disability and learners with childcare needs to apply if they have a need. Applicants are asked to provide evidence of their household income or a confirmation letter of their status. The College builds in a level of flexibility to support urgent 'hardship' requests in order to react to learners' change in circumstances. It also uses the Agency's funding rules to inform decisions around who can or cannot be supported.

DLS support provided by the College is based on learners fulfilling a number of conditions, these are set out in the award letter sent out and are as follows:
• Learners have to enrol on a fully funded FE course and pay College fees
• Good attendance, punctuality and good behaviour
• Learners may be liable to pay back some or all of the support if they withdraw from a course or from the College.

```
┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Learner makes enquiries │
│ (through IAG sessions,   │
│ website / interviewing)  │
└─────────────────────────┘
            │
            ▼
┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Learner is accepted -    │
│ offer letter and guidance│
│ on types of financial    │
│ support available is sent│
│ out                      │
└─────────────────────────┘
            │
            ▼
┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Learner completes an     │
│ application for financial │
│ support where relevant   │
└─────────────────────────┘
            │
            ▼
┌─────────────────────────┐      ┌─────────────────────────┐      ┌──────────────────────────────┐
│ Application is assessed  │─────▶│ Income thresholds used as│─────▶│ £22,000 household income or   │
│ and documentation        │      │ the main criteria for    │      │ less                          │
│ checked                  │      │ assessing eligibility    │      └──────────────────────────────┘
└─────────────────────────┘      └─────────────────────────┘
            │                                                        ┌──────────────────────────────┐
            ▼                                                   ────▶│ Encourages vulnerable        │
┌─────────────────────────┐                                          │ learners such as care        │
│ Award letters sent to    │                                          │ leavers, those with a        │
│ leaners                  │                                          │ disability and learners with │
└─────────────────────────┘                                          │ childcare needs to apply if  │
            │                                                        │ they have a need             │
            ▼                                                        └──────────────────────────────┘
┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Learner is enrolled      │
└─────────────────────────┘
            │
            ▼
┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Award is put into place  │
│ and learner is sent a    │
│ letter with the different │
│ payment phases           │
└─────────────────────────┘
            │
            ▼
┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Payments systems set up  │
│ and put into place       │
└─────────────────────────┘
            │
            ▼
┌─────────────────────────┐
│ Financial support        │
│ conditions               │
└─────────────────────────┘
```

The College also uses a separate spread-sheet to keep track/ review payments made to learners due to its open ended approach to application for financial support

Learners for example only entitled to free/ subsidised lunch if they are in college that day.

Learners have to enrol on a fully funded FE course and pay college fees

No set minimum attendance criteria however the college uses Prosolutions database to monitor attendance

Learner attendance record is also followed up with personal tutors in case by case basis

Good attendance, punctuality and good behaviour

Academic progress of learners who receive DLS is monitored through regular discussions with their personal tutors.

Travel allowance calculated per day and in lieu via BACS

The College does not set a minimum attendance restriction for learners receiving DLS support because in most cases this is automatically built into the support provided. Learners for example are only entitled to a free lunch or subsided lunch in their student restaurant if they are in the College on that day. However, generally learner attendance issues are followed up with personal tutors on a case by case basis.

Due to the College's rural location, non-resident learners often have long travel journeys and incur significant travel costs; Plumpton College operates its own bus service across various counties and supports learners with free or subsidised tickets if there is a suitable route. The College also supports learners with the costs of personal protective equipment such as riding hats, safety boots and chainsaw trousers.

Raising learners awareness of the eligibility criteria for DLS

Plumpton College uses a number of strategies to raise learners awareness of DLS as follows:

- Guidance notes are included in leaners offer pack
- The College's website advertises support fund information
- Learner information sessions are held on a regular basis
- Interview sessions for prospective students are held every Wednesday throughout the year
- One to one interviews are held with learners during enrolments
- College prospectus includes learner support fund information
- Personal tutors are made aware of the fund
- Twitter and posters at various sites of the College are used to provide information on the fund

Strategies used to raise awareness of DLS processes with members of staff

The College uses discussions held with tutors on specific learners and Departmental meetings to raise awareness of the fund with their staff. These meetings are also used to provide regular updates on the support available.

ILR Reporting

ILR reporting is handled by the College's MIS team, submissions of ILR returns for DLS learners are carried out by the Director of Finance. The College has recently purchased a database called 'Prosolutions' to support the management of its Learner Support Funds (LSF). The database includes a facility (an LSF Fund Allocation screen) that allows it to separately record funds that are agreed and paid to learners. Because of its open ended approach to applications for financial support, the College also uses a separate spread-sheet to keep track and review payments made to learners.

Evaluation strategy used to determine the progression of learners receiving DLS

Monitoring the progress of learners in receipt of DLS/Assessing impact of DLS on learners

Plumpton College monitors the academic progress of learners who receive DLS through regular discussions with their personal tutors. It also follows up with learners receiving DLS who withdraw from their courses to explore reasons why.

Strategy for limiting spend on DLS

Placing limits on the funding/Administration costs

To limit spend on DLS, Plumpton College has recently placed a tighter restriction on the rules that set out the amount it offers to cover equipment costs for certain courses to ensure a fairer process. All learners are also made aware of the maximum amount of funding they are entitled to claim during enrolment and in their award letters. The College also encourages learners to use their bus service where available to limit spend on DLS however if this is not possible a fixed daily travel allowance is set (based on distance from the College) and paid in arrears following an attendance check.

Financial caps are not placed on the childcare support provided. The College however places controls over when support is provided and monitors payments made for childcare support using attendance records. Childcare costs are paid in arrears direct to providers.

In 2012, the College created a specialist role to administer all bursary funds.