

European Social Fund (ESF) in England: Response to Coronavirus

Eligibility Rules – Priority Axis 4 COVID-19 Response: Investment Priority 4.1 Addressing the Digital Divide in response to Coronavirus

The Managing Authority is committed to working flexibly and pragmatically to support the economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic in England. This document is an addendum to the current ESF Eligibility Rules, which still apply, and sets out the Eligibility Rules to specifically support the new Priority Axis 4 (PA 4) of the Operational Programme: COVID-19 Response and new Investment Priority (IP) 4.1: Addressing the Digital Divide in response to Coronavirus.

This document is valid until 31 December 2020.

Background

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic many organisations supporting citizens have moved to providing the majority of their services online. This has resulted in a widening of the already existing digital divide – those that have access to the internet versus those that don't. It is likely this divide will continue to widen given the increasing level of concern regarding a second wave of the disease in England, which will result in even higher levels of inequality in the population.

PA 4 COVID-19 Response and the IP 4.1 Addressing the Digital Divide in response to Coronavirus have been introduced to address the issues associated with digital exclusion.

IP 4.1 will address two of the main 'access' issues associated with digital exclusion:

- The first is that of having physical access, i.e. a device that will allow the user to access the internet.
- Secondly, because having a device is often not enough (due to the cost of data and internet access) this IP will also provide data allowances to enable ESF participants to get online and access information and services for a period of three months.

Participant Eligibility

Under IP 4.1 ESF participants being supported through mainstream ESF projects and who have limited or no access to the internet because of their individual circumstances or have other underlying issues which means they are digitally excluded can be provided, on a loan basis, with an appropriate device (e.g. a tablet or a laptop) and a data allowance provided via a data dongle.

Projects will need to establish which participants are eligible to receive the equipment based on their individual circumstances and retain evidence to support their decision.

Eligible Activities

Projects under IP 4.1 will procure devices that can connect to the internet, provide data/internet access and assist participants in setting up the equipment. Devices need to provide:

- Access to the internet and online services;
- Email account set up and access.

In addition, Projects will need to ensure appropriate levels of security and control are included on the device and should also be evidenced. This includes:

- Access controls such as the ability to limit administrator access;
- Software installation restrictions;
- Anti-virus / anti-phishing / anti-ransomware controls;
- Internet filtering to limit access to inappropriate websites;
- Device tracking;
- The facility to remotely wipe the device of data if required.

Eligible activities are:

- The loan of digital devices to ESF participants to allow internet access;
- The provision of data, enabling access to the internet;
- Human resource to assist participants to set up the equipment and understand basic functions (e.g. start up, charging the device, using the data allowance, accessing the internet).

Projects will need to ensure that they record and retain details of all the devices and data/internet access they provide to ESF participants along with records of all participants receiving the equipment.

Any further or on-going support to enable participants to access online services should be provided through the existing ESF provision and cannot be supported through IP 4.1. Where appropriate and permitted, ESF mainstream projects can provide longer term digital support and training.

Who can apply for funding

Existing ESF projects can apply for funding from this PA via the published call on Gov.UK. If successful, a new funding agreement will be issued to cover this specific activity.



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Applications are also invited from fully constituted organisations not involved in ESF. If successful, delivery must be compliant with the activity and target group set out in the eligible activities section.

Applications from consortia are also welcome. A lead organisation must be selected to become the Applicant. It is this organisation that carries the responsibility and liability for carrying out a compliant project.

Funding Model

All project costs including equipment/data, the human resources needed to establish and manage the project, recording and distributing equipment and supporting participants with the initial 'set up' of equipment will be covered by a Lump Sum Simplified Cost Option (SCO).

Projects will be funded at 100% ESF. There is no requirement for match funding. There is no upper or lower financial limit applied to applications made against the Call. This is to enable smaller, locally based organisations to apply for funding but provides scope for larger organisations to apply to deliver larger scale projects where they have identified sufficient demand for provision.

The amount of funds a project applies for and awarded is the lump sum. It must be noted that, as a 'Lump Sum' project, if an organisation anticipates supporting 500 participants through the provision of the equipment and data, but only supports 450 by the end of the project activity, it would not be able to draw down the funding, so you must ensure that you accurately forecast the outputs in your application.

Funding

The total ESF allocation for this PA is £10,000,000. A National call will be launched by the ESF Managing Authority for all England areas outside of London.

The Greater London Authority will launch a separate call to invite applications to deliver activity within the Greater London Authority Region.

Timescales

Once a project has been approved for ESF funding, it can begin to undertake the activity in advance of a signed Funding Agreement. However, projects should note that this is at their own risk.

All project activity delivered under IP 4.1 must end by 31 December 2020 and all expenditure relating to project delivery must be defrayed by 31 December 2020. Projects will be required to submit their claim by 05 February 2021.

Please Note:

ESF will not fund activity that duplicates or cuts across national policy. Exemptions to this principle will be considered only where a local specific need and/or market failure has been demonstrated and where the activity falls within the scope of the Operational Programme. All applications will need to be eligible under the European Social Fund Operational Programme for England 2014 to 2020 and the eligibility



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rules set out in this document. The existing eligibility rules and programme guidance remain in place and should be adhered to and used alongside this document.