

Flexible Support Fund: Guidance

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Background

The Flexible Support Fund (FSF) is a locally managed budget to supplement existing services and tailor support to the needs of individuals in the local area. The local budget is the responsibility of the Service Leader.

FSF awards are discretionary, aimed at improving a claimant's job prospects and are subject to eligibility.

Eligibility

Universal Credit claimants are eligible for Flexible Support Fund (FSF) from and including the first assessment period if they have:

- provided identity verification, including the Habitual Residence Test where relevant
- attended their First Commitments Meeting, where required for their labour market regime
- accepted their Claimant Commitment

Before any award can be considered we ensure there are no previous FSF awards which may contradict or affect the current request.

Labour Market regimes

A claimant can be considered for a Flexible Support Fund (FSF) payment if they are allocated to any of the following Labour Market regimes:

- Intensive Work Search

- Work Preparation
- Work Focused Interview only
- No Work Related Requirements
- Light Touch

Claimants in the Working Enough regime are not currently eligible for FSF. However, subject to eligibility, lead carers in this regime may have access to FSF. See In work emergency payment (ignoring references to LMS).

Claimants in the Light Touch regime

As above, claimants in work in the Light Touch regime are eligible for Flexible Support Fund (FSF), which should be used to improve their job prospects further.

While it is entirely discretionary, the following are examples of when FSF might be used for this group, to:

- provide additional training to allow claimants to apply for promotion or other job opportunities
- pay for certificates to allow claimants to apply for other or additional employment
- provide clothing and / or equipment needed to remain or progress in employment
- provide support for travel costs to attend interviews for better paid employment
- pay additional upfront childcare costs for a new or existing job where it offers claimants more hours of work

FSF payments for childcare should only be made for the additional costs where these are not already covered by Universal Credit childcare payments. FSF payments for childcare will be paid separately from Universal Credit and paid directly to the provider. Care should be taken to ensure FSF is not used to pay for the remaining 15% of Universal Credit childcare costs (or any amount that has not been paid as it exceeds the maximum allowed for Universal Credit childcare costs).

Please note the above lists examples only. A conversation to discuss individual cases and requirements should take place occur in the same way as current barrier support guidance.

Pre-release prisoners

Flexible Support Fund (FSF) can be awarded to pre-release prisoners, for training and associated tests, licenses and certificates, such as CSCS, which will help them to obtain or take up the offer of employment when released.

Checks must be made to ensure the prisoner does not have access to other funding that would cover the cost of the activity, including funding offered through The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) or Scottish Prison Service (SPS).
For further information see Prison Leaver guidance.

Flexible Support Fund award types

This guidance for Flexible Support Fund (FSF) in Universal Credit provides information on the most commonly used awards:

- training and education (in this guide)
- barriers to work (in this guide)
- travel expenses (in this guide)

A full list of circumstances relevant to the award of FSF is available in the general DWP Flexible Support Fund guidance.

When the Flexible Support Fund must be awarded

There are circumstances when payment of travel, childcare or replacement care to attend training or education must be made to eligible individuals. For further information, see the:

- Payment of travel expenses
- Childcare costs
- Replacement care

When the Flexible Support Fund does not apply

Flexible Support Fund must not be awarded if it duplicates any provision which would normally be funded by government, it's partners or commercial providers such as:

- Work and Health Programme and Pioneer
- Fair Start Scotland
- Restart Scheme

In these cases, the provider of the claimant's current provision is required to offer and provide reimbursement of any appropriate expenses from the participant's initial meeting, and at all future interventions whilst they remain on the provision.

When the claimant starts the provision, providers should advise them of the evidence required to claim refunds of travel costs, for example bus tickets.

However, there are two exceptions when Flexible Support Fund can be awarded:

Travel expenses

For all contracted provision, Flexible Support Fund (FSF) travel expenses must continue to be paid where a claimant has been referred for support prior to a contracted provision programme. Also, when directed by their Work Coach to undertake an activity such as attendance at a DWP organised Job Fair, where travel costs are not paid by the Provider.

If the claimant attends activity arranged by the provider such as undertaking work related activities, job interviews or other related interviews, then the provider is responsible for funding their travel costs.

For participants on Restart who have already started work, there is no contractual obligation for the provider to pay upfront travel expenses to the place of work. If the provider chooses not to voluntarily support the claimant with these costs, the work coach can consider payment of up to 3 months travel expenses. See Payment of travel expenses.

Upfront childcare costs

For participants on Restart, there is no contractual obligation for the provider to pay upfront childcare costs when the claimant is starting work. If they require support with upfront childcare costs, the work coach can consider payment of these until the claimant receives their first wage. See Payment of childcare costs.

Conflicts with DWP policy objectives

Flexible Support Fund must also not be awarded if the activity conflicts with DWP policy objectives, if it:

- is to pay benefit-related travel costs
- directly replaces any benefit lost as part of a sanction
- is for top up wages once in work
- is to pay fines or similar penalties
- is to pay loans or debts
- is to pay a subsidy to an employer to provide an incentive to employ a particular person or group of people
- covers the cost of living, such as paying bills, household costs or buying food
- helps claimants who have a job or employment contract but are returning to work after a career break or maternity leave
- supports applications for immigration documentation, including biometric resident permits
- is to provide any medical-related certificates or forms
- duplicates support to prisoner's pre-release where funding is already available through The Ministry of Justice (MoJ) or Scottish Prison Service (SPS)

- is to support activity in respect of employment for sexual purposes.

As a minimum, a claimant in the Intensive Work Search regime is expected to attend fortnightly Work Search Reviews. The claimant must fund the travel costs themselves.

However, to support claimants to attend additional appointments, travelling expenses can be refunded. This includes refunding travel expenses for every alternate weekly Work Search Review during the first 13 weeks of being allocated into the Intensive Work Search regime.

For more information on follow up and overpayment recovery actions, see Overpayments.

Recording awards from Flexible Support Fund

All Flexible Support Fund awards are recorded.

Childcare and Flexible Support Fund

Flexible Support Fund (FSF) for Childcare costs may be awarded for:

1. training and education_or
2. upfront childcare costs - for costs incurred when starting work or increasing hours of work

This list is not exhaustive please refer to the Childcare Costs guide (ignore the references to LMS in this guide).

Payments should not exceed the maximum amount for the flexible support fund childcare costs. Details of the amounts can be found in section 13 in the, Flexible Support Fund Eligibility under the heading 'Historical child care cost limits for checking purposes'.

See also the Childcare costs and Flexible Support Fund guidance.

Upfront childcare costs

Upfront childcare costs are costs incurred when starting work (including additional jobs) or an increase in hours.

For claimants already in work, Flexible Support Fund (FSF) for childcare costs may also be considered where the claimant:

- has started a subsequent or additional job and are awaiting their first wages for their further employment

- has increased their working hours in their existing job and are awaiting receipt of their first increased wages

There are no minimum hours required for Universal Credit claimants only accessing FSF for upfront childcare costs.

When a claimant has work which continues beyond a month, we should offer a full month of FSF childcare costs. This is to ensure the childcare received is paid for until UC childcare cost are paid.

Where a claimant has not got a full month's work, FSF childcare should be offered for the period of childcare provided.

FSF payments for childcare should only be paid for costs that are not already covered by Universal Credit childcare payments.

FSF payments for childcare will be paid separately from Universal Credit and paid directly to the childcare provider. Upfront Childcare costs paid for through FSF can be claimed for again through Universal Credit.

Where the Childcare is paid for care provided on or after the 28th of June, the claimant can report the same costs on their Universal Credit claim.

When the claimant reports the childcare costs paid by FSF on their Universal Credit claim they will receive up to 85% of the actual childcare costs paid by the FSF in Universal Credit. The Universal credit payment will not include retainers, other fees or administration costs.

Claimants who pay for more than 1 month's childcare in 1 assessment period will have any eligible support apportioned across the periods covered by the childcare, up to a maximum of 3 assessment periods.

This means the childcare costs are paid twice, once through FSF, and once through Universal Credit. The payment from Universal Credit is to put towards the next set of childcare costs.

Once the claimant has received the FSF and the Universal Credit childcare costs payment for the same period, they will pay and report further childcare costs through Universal Credit. See Childcare costs guidance.

Training and education

Refer to paragraph 3 of the Training and Education: Eligibility guidance for a list factors which must be considered before any claimant referral to education or training funded by Flexible Support Fund (FSF) or agreeing to purchase it, is made.

DWP guidance also sets out a number of other training considerations, including:

- training that should not be funded
- training requiring further consideration
- training at NVQ, SNVQ level 3 and 4 (or equivalent)

DWP guidance sets out the funding process to follow.

Paying childcare costs for attending training or education

Flexible Support Fund (FSF) **must** be awarded:

- when a parent is attending mandatory provision where such costs are not met by the provider
- where it has been agreed that a parent can attend approved non-contracted provision, for example, there is a formal agreement in place
- where it has been agreed that a parent can participate in a Work Trial, work experience or sector-based work academy programme.

FSF must not be awarded in the following circumstances:

- for attending training courses, provision or an activity where no formal agreement is in place
- for attending provision where the provider is contracted to, or has agreed to pay the participant's childcare costs

Mandatory considerations: Flexible Support Fund childcare costs for attending training or education

Some considerations must always apply when a Flexible Support Fund (FSF) award is made for childcare costs. Local flexibilities do not apply. These are:

- the parent must identify the childcare provider - any contract for childcare is between the parent and the childcare provider and must not involve Jobcentre Plus
- the childcare must be registered - Tax Credits description of registered childcare should be applied (please see HMRC: Tax credits and childcare website site for [Registered or approved childcare\(link is external\)](#))
- ensure any agreement to meet childcare costs on behalf of the parent does not exceed the maximum permitted amounts
- ensure the amount being charged for childcare is reasonable, considering the average charges in the local area
- ensure the parent is made aware of the maximum childcare payments available where relevant

- ensure the parent is eligible to receive FSF childcare costs throughout the relevant period
- all payments must be made directly to the childcare provider into their nominated bank or building society account through SOP (Single Operating Platform)
- all payments must be paid in arrears unless costs are required in advance

The award of FSF must be recorded to ensure childcare costs are not awarded from Universal Credit for the same period.

Barriers to work

Flexible Support Fund should be considered to remove barriers that are:

- preventing claimants from moving closer to the job market
- hindering a claimant's search for work
- preventing a claimant from accepting a firm job offer or moving into self-employment
- preventing them from increasing their earnings, through increased hours or job change

Examples are:

- smart clothing for interviews or to start work
- essential work wear, but not safety wear as the employer has a duty to provide this
- essential tools and equipment - for example, chef's knives
- travel costs

A barrier award must not be made where it is the employer's responsibility (under Health & Safety legislation) to provide the item.

Flexible Support Fund barrier awards

DWP guidance sets out the funding processes to support payment of a barriers award from Flexible Support Fund. The relevant processes for Universal Credit are:

- sourcing the goods
- forms and letters
- payment methods
- follow up action

For barrier payments, it is strongly recommended that the most appropriate payment method is used. The order of preference is:

- Retail Trade Framework or local supplier arrangement invoice payments
- retrospective payment
- advance payment

For further information on the above payment methods see the guidance on 'Follow up action'.

Travel expenses

Please refer to the following DWP Payment of travel expenses guidance for more detailed information:

- Travel to interview for disabled people
- Travel expenses for job interviews
- Travel expenses for Work Trials

Mandatory awards for travel

An award for travel expenses must be made when a claimant:

- attends additional appointments other than the fortnightly Work Search Reviews when they are allocated to the Intensive Work Search regime, this includes:
 - alternate weekly Work Search Review during the first 13 weeks of being allocated into the Intensive Work Search regime
- attends mandatory provision where such costs are not met by the provider
- attends approved non-contracted provision where this is previously agreed with DWP staff
- participates in:
 - Work Trial
 - work experience
 - sector-based work academy programme

When an award must not be made for travel expenses

Flexible Support Fund (FSF) awards for travel expenses must not be made in the following circumstances:

- claimants attending their Initial Evidence Interview or First Commitments Meeting
- claimants attending training courses, provision or an activity where no formal agreement is in place
- claimants attending provision where the provider is contracted to pay (or has agreed to pay) the participant's travel costs

- claimants attending overseas training courses

Other circumstances

Aside from the circumstances when an award must be made, the Flexible Support Fund (FSF) award for travel payments is discretionary and subject to local guidelines and budgets.

FSF travel payments can be made in advance if it removes the barrier of getting to and sustaining employment. This includes customers taking on additional job(s) or additional hours in current job(s).

The funding of overseas travel (other than for job interviews or to attend training courses, which are not permitted) is only allowed with Service Leader agreement.

How much to award

If it is not possible for claimants to use local or other concessionary public transport passes, the award must be based on the cost of public transport by the most reasonable and economical route. If using private transport, the award is 25 pence per mile by the most direct route.

Paying travel expenses

DWP guidance sets out the processes to follow when making a payment of Flexible Support Fund for an award of travel expenses.

Forms and letters

The generic DWP guidance outlines the relevant Forms and letters for Flexible Support Fund awards.

Overpayments

DWP guidance sets out the processes to follow when there is an overpayment of Flexible Support Fund.