



North Yorkshire Local Assistance Fund
Annual Workshop Notes
September 2018



North Yorkshire County Council (NYCC) would like to thank all those who attended the Local Assistance Fund Annual Workshop on 25 September. More than 30 people attended, representing a range of authorised and supporting agencies, joining representatives from Connect Assist, the Fund's administrator, and members of the Fund's Governing Group. The Workshop once again proved useful for NYCC and Connect Assist to receive feedback on the Fund as well as suggestions for going forward, and we hope that all those who attended found the workshop useful.

Attendees received three presentations, the first outlining high level data and trends for the Fund. Another from Connect Assist offering their insight and thoughts from administering the Fund. The final presentation introduced some findings from the Impact Study completed earlier in 2018. The proposal for an impact study was discussed at the Workshop in 2017 and the feedback from that session informed the final requirements.

Like previous years there were also two discussion sessions considering a range of questions. The notes on these questions can be found below. The responses and comments of the Governing Group can be found in red where applicable.

NYCC will now review the feedback provided and liaise with Connect Assist where there are aspects of the Fund that can be added to or changed.

The workshop slides will be sent out alongside this document.

Please share your experiences, thoughts and comments about the Fund as well as your key messages for the external administrator (Connect Assist) and/or NYCC.

- One attendee commented that there was some confusion as to exactly what could be applied for and in what combination.
 - The list of goods on the NYLAF web page outlines what can be applied for and how often. Authorised Agents can also use the search function at the beginning of the application process to see what has previously been awarded to an applicant, and when. Clothing and beds and bedding items are the only items that can be awarded in multiple amounts and for it still to only count as one award. In response to feedback at a previous workshop a

microwave and fridge/freezer white good combination was also introduced for those applicants in need of both items.

- It was noted that there had been an increase in demand for support services more widely across the sector and that this meant support from other agencies hasn't always been available when required.
- An attendee highlighted that applicants often use up their quota for local food bank support and then used up their quota for NYLAF food vouchers and still were unable to cover waiting periods for benefits, particularly in situations where a mandatory reconsideration had been requested – which can take weeks to complete.
- Building on this it was noted that there were some applicants who had been hit by a waiting period for a legacy benefit and were then also hit by the initial four week wait for Universal Credit.
 - Universal Credit claimants are able to apply for an advance to cover the initial waiting period. Information about advances can be found on the Government's website [here](#).
- It was suggested that food bank provision and NYLAF vouchers were complementary and were needed in tandem for those who were desperate. Food banks could provide sealed, tinned and packaged items and the supermarket vouchers could then be used to buy items not available from food banks.
- There were a number of positive comments at the Workshop about the NYLAF and the administration of the service by Connect Assist.
- An increasing trend was noticed of applicants ringing Connect Assist directly for support and bypassing the Authorised Agent.
 - There are only a small number of permissible circumstances where an application will be accepted directly from an applicant and in all circumstances this call must come via the NYCC Customer Service Centre. Where an applicant is not able to apply directly or has not come via the Customer Service Centre they will be redirected to the NYCC Customer Service Centre where a trained advisor will make an initial assessment before determining the most appropriate action.
- A number of individuals mentioned that annual applications were an issue and questioned what could be done about this.
 - The Governance Group and Connect Assist are aware that this is an issue for the Fund. More detailed analysis will be undertaken in the next few weeks looking at applications to determine the extent of the issue as well as potential solutions. We ask that Authorised Agents refrain from telling applicants when they are next able to apply.

- The representative from the Welfare Benefits Unit noted that they didn't receive many questions about the NYLAF, suggesting the process seemed to be clear.
- There was some concern that the NYLAF was not well known in Craven.
- It was asked why certain organisations weren't Authorised Agents for the NYLAF.
 - We do have an Expression of Interest Form for organisations interested in becoming an Authorised Agent. You can request a copy of this by emailing nylaf@northyorks.gov.uk. Requests are then considered at the next meeting of the NYLAF Governance Group.
- It was noted that there were issues with people who were referred but not open cases to the service, potentially leaving officers in difficult situations where they are unable to verify the circumstances of the applicant.
- The question was raised about how telephone applications were audited.
 - In the rare circumstance where an applicant is making a direct application for a non-emergency award they must provide proof that they satisfy all of the eligibility criteria, including a vulnerability threshold. For other telephone applications – first time food or utility support – an initial assessment (verbal and using the CRM system) is done by the NYCC Customer Service Centre. An applicant only needs to satisfy the basic eligibility criteria and does not need to meet one of the vulnerability thresholds. These applications are automatically approved and no audit check is required.
- An issue was raised about applicants being unable to use PayPoint vouchers to pay for utility where they pay by direct debit.
 - PayPoint energy vouchers cannot be paid directly into an applicant's bank account. Applicants can, however, contact their energy provider to arrange for an alternate method of payment. Energy providers (for homes with SMART meters) are able to issue a swipe card that can also be used, alongside other payment methods, to credit a customer's account. PayPoint energy vouchers can be paid onto this card.
- Further prioritisation of non-emergency provision was suggested to identify only those items which are emergency items.
- It was noted that the increase in applications in Harrogate mentioned during presentation one was not surprising given the impact of Universal Credit in the area.
- Some agents requested a guide or training manual on the application process for the NYLAF – how to submit applications and how they are administered.
 - While a guide was made a few years ago this is now quite dated and we will be updating this. We are awaiting the outcome of the

procurement exercise later this year before completing the guide, as a new provider may be using a new online platform for applications.

- The consistency of decisions over the telephone was questioned.
 - As outlined above the majority of telephone applications are for first time emergency applications in a 12 month period and will automatically be accepted so long as the basic eligibility criteria are met and the applicant has not previously received an award for food and/or utility in the period. If you feel that there has been an inconsistency in a decision please do contact Connect Assist who will be happy to investigate or explain the situation.

The core features of the NYLAF have remained relatively stable for some time, however, with pressures of demand, increasing cost of items, and potentially a change of provider, are the current elements of the service (items, eligibility criteria & entitlement, authorised agency network, referrals) fit for purpose? If not, what changes would you suggest?

- One attendee noted that in her experience applicants only wanted the bed and not the bedding.
 - If the bedding is not required please make this known on the application form.
- Further information about ad hoc item requests was sought.
 - The Fund is able to consider requests for items not on the standard list of items, where it can be demonstrated that the item will make a significant positive difference to the circumstances of the household and this should be described on the application form. The Fund makes a small number of such awards each year, usually where a more suitable item is required due to a certain medical need. Please note that the ability to meet such requests may depend on the availability of a suitable item, existing supply arrangements, and the cost of the item.
- There were a number of discussions about the extent to which organisations look at other places first (especially as this varies from local authority to local authority) and whether the NYLAF was used as a last resort. It was mentioned that Facebook was an excellent resource, particularly for free or cheap items.
- It was asked if a single person could apply for a double bed.
 - This was raised at a previous workshop and the Governance Group subsequently decided that there was no issue with a single person requesting a double bed, but for reasons of costs agents should consider a single bed as the default option.
- It was asked if agents could not receive referrals for people who were not known to the agency.

- One attendee asked if vouchers could be emailed again.
 - It was clarified at the Workshop that the vouchers can be emailed if requested.
- It was asked if carpets could be included on the list of items.
 - This is a request that has been made at each previous workshop. It was decided to introduce rugs as an available item for the NYLAF for those families with children under 5. It was decided not to introduce carpets due to the high fixed cost of the item, not wanting to excuse the obligations of landlords, and that carpets could not be moved between properties which was potentially an issue given the level of transient applicants to the NYLAF.
- It was suggested to consider a new supplier for items, potentially locally sourced.
 - Supply arrangements are regularly assessed for best value. If a new administrator is appointed after the procurement exercise it is likely that they will be using a new supplier of items. The NYLAF held discussions with a number of re-use providers at the end of 2017 but reaching agreement about supply in North Yorkshire has proved difficult due to the number of different schemes in the county. The NYLAF must ensure that there is a consistency of offer right across the county for any local approach to work.
- A review of the application form was requested to ensure that it is fit for purpose.
 - A review of the application form will be undertaken in the New Year after the conclusion of the procurement process.
- It was noted that a check could be done at a later date to confirm what had happened to goods that had been awarded. Even warning of a potential check may be enough to discourage fraudulent activity.
- It was asked if household repairs could be included on the list of items.
 - Household repairs were originally available from the NYLAF but were removed in 2014 due to the individual cost of each repair.

Attendees were asked their thoughts on the following statements:

A non-emergency application (white goods, household items etc) should be conditional upon receiving support with budgeting.

There was general agreement with this statement in principle as it was felt that where applicant's had a stronger grip on their budget it may help keep them from entering a situation of crisis again. Much discussion was prompted when further detail was requested about how it might work and who would deliver the budgeting support.

It was noted that many organisations do already offer budgeting support and advice but the onus remained on the individual to own it, and sometimes with

even the best will in the world, the circumstances of someone's life meant that it was not possible. Some attendees highlighted that they worked with individuals who could not read or write and for them budgeting would not be possible. Similarly, some applicants may not require support with budgeting and may take offence if it was mandated.

Some potential proposals were to have a simple budgeting leaflet that could be distributed, or to prevent a second non-emergency application if they cannot evidence engagement with budgeting support. Support generally favoured local options as opposed to contacting a national charity or support line.

There was some concern about agency capacity as it was noted that budgeting can take quite a long time over an extensive period. Individual need must be assessed and budgeting for one person will often be different to someone else. Attendee's also questioned how the NYLAF could check compliance with budgeting support.

If there are any suitable ways to determine if an applicant is in genuine need when presenting at an agency.

This was generally considered difficult by attendees. A number of attendees commented they were fortunate that they could conduct home visits with most clients and confirm, or get a stronger sense of someone's circumstances by doing this. For those who could not conduct home visits a judgement was required based on the initial conversation with the individual.

It was asked if that assessment could be transferred to the NYLAF team, to people who know the service well. Experience and information sharing were often mentioned as good ways to reach an effective judgement. One attendee highlighted that a detailed knowledge of the NYLAF by someone the organisation had not met before, raised significant red flags that this person may not be in genuine need. It was also noted that those agencies who had a dedicated NYLAF member of staff find this a little easier than for those agencies where everyone does it but they may only do it very infrequently.

From experience it was noted that most people don't like to ask for help and are genuinely in need. For those applicants who have been to multiple agencies it was suggested to contact the previous agency to ask about their circumstances then and how their circumstances have changed and why they are going to a different agency – although it was recognised that new data protection regulation made this more difficult.

Please note that if you ever have reason to doubt what you are being told by an applicant regarding their circumstances, then please state to the applicant that you require further evidence of their circumstances, or that they need to

be in receipt of your service for a longer period, before an application can be submitted. If this is not possible then please make a member of the NYLAF team aware of the application and it can be flagged as potentially fraudulent.

An applicant must be working with/seeing an agency for a period of time before they are able to apply to the Local Assistance Fund.

This received a mix response from attendees. Some respondents agreed that they would rather be working with someone for a certain period of time before being able to submit an application as this can help to confirm circumstances. Others noted that they either only work with people for timed interventions and they need to be able to apply quickly, or it was the first time someone has ever sought out support and they are in genuine need.

It was posed that the arrangement at each agency might also make this more difficult to deal with and administer. It was questioned whether the NYLAF could be conditional on further support instead, such as onward referral to other organisations.

Enquiries: nylaf@northyorks.gov.uk

Public information: www.northyorks.gov.uk/nylaf

Partner updates: www.nypartnerships.org.uk/nylaf