



**North Yorkshire Local Assistance Fund**  
**Annual Workshop Notes**  
**October 2017**



North Yorkshire County Council (NYCC) would like to thank all those who attended the Local Assistance Fund Annual Workshop on 25 October. A range of authorised and supporting agencies were present as well as 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 two presentations, one detailing some of the key developments for the Fund since the last workshop, as well as covering some of the headline data. And another from Connect Assist offering their insight and thoughts from administering the Fund. This was followed by a short question and answer before breaking into the first of two group discussions considering a range of questions circulated prior to the workshop.

The notes on these questions can be found below. The responses and comments of the Governing Group can be found in red where applicable.

-----

The second part of this year's Workshop introduced an impact study that the Fund's Governing Group would like to undertake to consider the impact of the Local Assistance Fund and the difference that it makes. Attendees were asked to consider questions for partners, discussion topics with applicants, and provide feedback on the methodology.

The questions invoked much discussion and it was valuable to hear the views of partners on the topic. The feedback from this part of the Workshop will be collated separately and will go to the next meeting of the Fund's Governing Group in November where a decision will be made about how and when to complete the study. Further information will be made available to partners as it progresses.

-----

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.

-----

**Do you have any feedback about the service? You may wish to think about referrals, signposting, awards, the application process, and contact with NYCC's Customer Service Centre or the Fund's Administrator Connect Assist.**

- More information was requested on the online forms to outline aspects of the process that were unclear. A number of attendees highlighted that they were unaware they could add an additional contact, or that 'primary contact' indicated who should be communicated with about the award.
  - Further guidance will be added to the online forms to provide additional detail on these questions. We are also aware that further guidance was requested for the question relating to 'other sources of support tried'.
- It was asked if veterans could be included as its own vulnerability.
  - After some discussion the Governance Group concluded that being a veteran doesn't itself make someone vulnerable and that there are many veterans who do successfully transition to civilian life. The Group acknowledged that there were specific issues that may be more accentuated as a result of service in the armed forces, particularly mental health problems, however, it was felt that the existing vulnerability criteria were sufficiently broad that they should not restrict veterans from being eligible. There are also a number of excellent funds and support services available for veterans locally and nationally and it is expected that veterans are accessing these services before applying to the NYLAF.
- It was noted that the current threshold for carer was too restrictive and that actually there are many carers who are not in receipt of carer's allowance.
  - The vulnerability criteria for 'carer' was changed in mid-2016 after consultation with partners. Previously an applicant could apply to the Fund where they were not in receipt of carers allowance or carer's premium so long as the key qualifying condition for these were met, where: *you looked after someone for at least 35 hours per week and were not paid for this*. Feedback received at the time noted that it was hard to validate if someone was a carer for 35 hours or more per week. Additionally, the Fund's criteria were not accurately aligned to the Government's eligibility for carer's allowance. Ultimately, the vulnerability criteria for the Fund need to be useful and not difficult to validate. In light of feedback received and a need to ensure accurate and straightforward validation it was decided to change the eligibility to its current form.
- It was highlighted that particularly in Ryedale there were households which relied on oil to heat their homes.
  - While the NYLAF cannot provide oil, an authorised agent can request a one-off cash amount to meet the cost of the oil where they are satisfied that the award will only be used for this purpose.

Confirmation and justification is required by the agent on the online form. There is also further information for applicants about oil schemes on the 'other forms of support' leaflet available on the website.

- It was raised that there are households with non-key meters for utility.
  - While we are able to accommodate payment on the main forms of meters there may be some, such as coin meters, where a standard PayPoint award will not be credited. If this is the case, like oil above a one-off cash award can be made if requested by the agent where they are satisfied that the award will only be used for this purpose. Confirmation and justification is required by the agent on the online form.
- There were a number of comments noting the swift and simple form and process.
- It was noted that checking for low household income can be difficult / time consuming, however, it was acknowledged that as it was part of the eligibility criteria the Fund had a right to ask for verification.
- One agent raised the issue of not knowing if customers have received an award from the Rainbow Centre and therefore not being able to tell if customers have used up their entitlement. This can add time and frustration going through the process only to get an email stating ineligibility. There was also some confusion around what counts as one or two claims for emergency provision.
- A gap for real emergencies was highlighted – it was noted that benefits and health services historically were able to provide this.
- Issue noted about where / who emails go to. An example was raised that a team email is monitored by business support who do not know where to then send the emails.
  - When creating accounts we ask for team emails to ensure that information about applications is available to prevent delays, in the event that the member of staff working with the applicant is off work. When starting an application form the generic details linked to an account will automatically be on the form. You, as a support worker, are able to add your own details to the form as well. The only automated email sent from the online system is the confirmation of submission email. Any further correspondence is manual and Connect Assist staff will use named contacts (and emails) where specified in the online form.
- A number of positive comments were made about the responsiveness of NYLAF staff, speed of decision making and delivery times for awards.
- It was noted that there appeared to be considerable variation of approaches among agents and among staff within each agent. This ranged from appropriate challenge and seeking alternate sources of

support, to submitting applications when asked by applicants. It was acknowledged that this varied depending on the capacity of the agent, the relationship with the applicant and the type of session being delivered at the time (drop-in, one-to-one etc).

- Our expectation of the challenge and vigilance of Authorised Agents shall be included in the guidance on fraudulent and suspected fraudulent applications.

**In 2016/17 the Fund received the highest number of applications to date. While the Fund would like to support as many vulnerable individuals and families as possible, we are aware that increasing demand puts pressure on authorised agents, Connect Assist and the Fund's limited budget. Can anything be done to better manage demand, given fixed budget?**

- It was suggested to concentrate on key vulnerable groups.
  - While a reduction in the number of vulnerable groups would reduce spend it is not possible to compare one vulnerable group to another when determining if one is more or less eligible than another.
- It was suggested that white goods could be removed from the non-emergency provision.
  - White goods are the most expensive individual items awarded from the Fund. They are a valued item from the Fund as many applicants do not have the means to purchase a white good item. Authorised Agents were surveyed on a range of options to reduce spend in 2016 of which the removal of items was the second least requested change. It will continue to be included as an option on consultations.
- Some attendees wanted to see emergency provision prioritised over non-emergency provision, others did not.
- It was noted that the NYLAF should form part of a strategic vision for NYCC as a whole, with services and support aligned.
- It was asked what the main white good award was.
  - The main white good award is washing machines. Further information can be found in the August 2017 bulletin on the partnership page: <http://nypartnerships.org.uk/nylaf>
- It was noted that there was an expectation among some applicants that the NYLAF was an annual entitlement and that many are aware of when they can apply again. It was acknowledged that agents should be vigilant with repeat claimants.
- Finding an appropriate solution to the twin issues of demand and the expectation of an annual award was acknowledged as a challenge. It was suggested to extend the 12 month period for awards to 18 or 24 months to help reduce expenditure, but it was acknowledged that it would probably just delay claims rather than eliminate them. Another suggestion was to

increase the entitlement for emergency and non-emergency provision but make non-emergency awards a lifetime award.

- It was suggested to seek clarification from the applicant about the proactive steps taken to make changes / improve their situation before being eligible for another award after 12 months.
- It was asked if all agents were checking for alternate sources of support. The speed and responsiveness of the NYLAF could be a negative in that it is often seen as the first port of call for support. It was noted that there were often charitable alternatives, although depending on what was needed the timeliness of support may not be appropriate. One agent noted that there were a couple of other national grant funds available for her clients that were accessed before the NYLAF.
  - **The NYLAF is a last chance emergency fund designed to support those who have exhausted, or have no other forms of support available. We would like to remind partners to be vigilant when working with applicants to explore other options before accessing the NYLAF.**
- There was a concern that the NYLAF was being used to plug the benefits gap.
- One agent recalled that a driver from the supplier had been put up in a hotel overnight in Scarborough as they were only delivering one item. It was asked if that cost was being passed onto the Fund.
  - **Connect Assist have investigated this issue with their supplier and have sent the following response:**

*The price paid is purely for goods, any additional costs are covered by the supplier. It is very unusual for the vehicle to come down with only 1 item on it. However, if this is the case the supplier should be commended as there is no additional cost for the delivery of one item. At times they may choose to stay over in a town, this is at their discretion and their costs.*

### **Is there anything that you think we could do to improve the process for you and your customers going forward?**

- It was asked if the referrer could be notified on the progress of the application.
  - **Application status can be viewed under the 'My Applications' section of the online system. It is advised to have the application reference to hand in order to quickly find the application.**
- It was raised that it can be difficult to get in touch with the supplier if an item has not been delivered.

- When arranging delivery the supplier should provide appropriate contact information. In the event that this does not happen please contact Connect Assist who will alert the supplier.
- Links to other sources of funding that might be available for applicants would be helpful.
  - A list of other sources of funding is being prepared and will be made available on the partnerships web page.
- A need was identified by a number of attendees in the room for a quick guide / top tips sheet to help staff making applications (particularly new staff and those who don't regularly make applications) to understand their role and to complete the online form.
  - This has been completed and is available on the partnerships page: <http://nypartnerships.org.uk/nylaf>
- It was questioned if the time frame for audit checks of 10 working days was long enough.
  - If there are going to be any issues with providing the documentation then please contact Connect Assist to let them know as soon as possible.

**Is there anything else you wanted to raise; any other issues or comments about either the future of the NYLAF or the service in the past 12 months?**

- A number of partners requested information about where to report suspected fraud and examples of fraud. Further information about what happens as a result would also be helpful.
  - This has been included in the guidance mentioned above.
- It was suggested to include tick box reasons on the application form to better understand why people are applying to the Fund.
  - A list of possible reasons has been finalised and will be included on the emergency form in the near future.
- It was noted that when Connect Assist call applicants it comes up as an unknown number.
  - Connect Assist are investigating this issue as a matter of urgency. Once this has been rectified the number applicants should expect will be added in the appropriate place to the online form.
- Changes to homelessness legislation were due to be in force from April 2018. This may have implications for the vulnerability criteria.
- The quality of items provided by the supplier was praised.
- It was asked to make sure that information about audit checks go to the right person.
  - Please see the response above about where / who emails go to.
- The Stakeholder Workshops make partners feel valued and listened to.

- This was really positive to hear. The Workshops continue to be a valuable session for the Council and the Administrator to receive feedback from partners and we intend to continue arranging it.
- One agent was concerned that the letter which accompanies vouchers makes reference to an applicant's entitlement to white goods.
  - The letter outlines what entitlement is available from the Fund. While we appreciate that it may encourage applicants who have not received certain items to maximise their entitlement we have also found that by including this information in the letter it makes it clear to applicants who have reached their entitlement that they can no longer apply for further assistance.

The information on the letter is also readily available on the public website.

\*\*\*\*\*

Enquiries: [nylaf@northyorks.gov.uk](mailto:nylaf@northyorks.gov.uk)

Public information: [www.northyorks.gov.uk/nylaf](http://www.northyorks.gov.uk/nylaf)

Partner updates: [www.nypartnerships.org.uk/nylaf](http://www.nypartnerships.org.uk/nylaf)