



North Yorkshire Local Assistance Fund
Update Bulletin for Agencies
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Stakeholder Workshop

North Yorkshire County Council (NYCC) would like to thank all those who attended the Local Assistance Fund Annual Workshop on 8 November. A range of authorised and supporting agencies were represented as well as the Deputy Chief Executive from Connect Assist, and the Funds 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 12 months on from becoming the Fund administrator. This was followed by a short question and answer before breaking into small group discussions on a range of questions circulated prior to the workshop.

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.

The notes on these questions can be found below:

Connect Assist have been administering the NYLAF for over a year now, do you have any feedback about the service?

- Comments from the tables were positive about the impact Connect Assist had made. It was noted that a better service was being provided, staff were helpful

and attentive and the delivery times for items, especially emergency awards were quick.

- One attendee noted that overall times had slowed slightly in recent months.
 - o *Rusty Livock (Connect Assist) had noted in her presentation that sometimes there can be a knock on effect in the system if there are delays getting further information about an application from applicants or agents.*

Have there been any issues for your agency in dealing with new referrals (authorised agencies) or with clients who need to be signposted on (for supporting agencies) – particularly in terms of available resources and prioritisation of work? How many of the clients signposted are ‘repeat’ customers?

- An attendee from a supporting agency noted that they often ring the NYCC Customer Service Centre on behalf of applicants while the individual is present. On occasions they are told that the applicant must ring instead, but this is not always consistent.
 - o *If there is ever any confusion about the information provided by a Customer Service Centre Advisor then please note the time of the call and the name of the advisor and email your query to nylaf@northyorks.gov.uk. This can then be followed up.*
- It was noted that turnover in staff can have an impact on resources. Especially if the staff were familiar with the NYLAF.
- It was highlighted that there was generally a very good awareness and understanding amongst applicants about the criteria and what can be applied for.
- The skill of authorised agents was emphasised in order to identify services in the area that meet the needs of clients. NYLAF should be the last port of call for applicants.
- It was noted that agents sometimes have to take the clients word about their circumstances without any prior or first-hand knowledge. This then makes it difficult to make a judgement about an applicant especially when the form asks for confirmation of circumstances.
 - o *We understand that there will be times when a judgement will have to be made by the agent about the individual in front of them and their circumstances. Where you ever have reason to doubt the validity of what you are being told then do not submit the application. Ask the individual or family for evidence of their circumstances if you are unsure. If you ever believe that an individual is trying to deliberately defraud the Fund then please report this to nylaf@northyorks.gov.uk.*
- Repeat customers varied for the agencies, with some low and others higher. It was noted that as Universal Credit is rolled out, this might lead to increasing numbers of referrals.

In July 2016 a number of changes to the vulnerability thresholds came into effect. Do you feel that support is getting to the people who need it? Do the thresholds effectively prioritise those most in need, or are there groups that you support that are not eligible for the Fund but you think should be eligible?

- It was commented that the number and scope of the vulnerability categories were quite broad and reached those it needed to.
- As Universal Credit is rolled out in full across each District in North Yorkshire there could be a new group of customers for the Fund. Experience of Universal Credit in pilot areas such as Harrogate has discovered some faults and delays in the system, including a five week processing time before any benefits are received. This delay could drive those people to make emergency applications to the NYLAF.
- It was mentioned that some agencies may be accessing the NYLAF ahead of other forms of support or funding that might be more onerous to access.

To what extent have you been able to offer longer term (i.e. ongoing) support to customers who have been referred to you for support from the Fund? What kind of support have you been able to provide?

- One agency commented that applicants were already known to their services and support workers, and that the NYLAF was an additional resource for applicants.
- It was noted that NYLAF can be most effective when it is used as part of a package of support, such as Discretionary Housing Payments and Personal Budgeting Grants.
- Drop-ins and triage were an effective way to identify individuals and families who were not known to the service but might benefit from longer term support. Although it was emphasised that this did not apply to everyone that presented at drop-ins. For some individuals the only contact with the service might be the NYLAF application.
- Some services were able to link applicants to other forms of support in the area as well as source additional items.

Since the previous stakeholder workshop a number of items have been added or removed from the Fund as a result of feedback from authorised agents. Are there any items that are not offered that you feel are needed? Are there any items that you think could be removed from the NYLAF offer?

- Microwave combo with other white good items was suggested.
 - o *The Fund's Governing Group didn't believe there to be a sufficient enough case for a microwave with another white good item. The existing microwave and fridge/freezer combo is an understandable pairing.*

- It was suggested prioritising items, or allowing more than one white good item for certain vulnerable groups. Individuals with mental health issues living in supported housing need more items, particularly white goods to help facilitate independent living.
 - o *While we understand that the needs of applicants and vulnerable groups will vary, allowing more than one white good item would resurrect the issue faced in year one about budget overspend when applicants could apply for more than one white good item. Similarly it would be hard to justify allowing more than white good item for certain vulnerable groups and not others – this could create a real or perceived ranking of vulnerable groups that in reality are equally important.*
- It was questioned why curtains weren't transportable as was suggested in the presentation.
 - o *It is acknowledged that curtains are transportable however, they aren't always transferable because of varying sizes of window.*
- Towels were suggested as a possible household item.
 - o *Towels are a low cost item that are widely available.*
- It was noted that social housing landlords were facing a 1% cut in rent funding as well as other pressures and that comments about the responsibility of the landlord to fit carpets, curtains and do deep cleans and clearances weren't always fair. One attendee added that their supported housing landlord is no longer as generous as they once were.
- Options for tenants were mentioned such as: the opportunity to retain any existing furniture after someone has moved out, donating furniture to other tenants, one off events such as a furniture swap and sell in Harrogate, charity shops and community furniture stores, and sourcing support from charities relating to their vulnerability.
- The community forum model was praised in Ryedale where local organisations, charities and furniture stores coordinate support.
- Mobile phone top-up was suggested as most people now own smart phones and use them for a greater range of services and activities than as simply a communication device. It is expected that Universal Credit claimants will make a claim online and maintain an online account.
 - o *This item created a lot of discussion within the Fund's Governing Group. It was accepted that smart phones are now used as much more than simply a communication device. The Group acknowledged that more services were moving online and more people in society now owned smart phones (even despite personal or financial circumstances in some instances). However, the Group couldn't address some of the issues with the award. The award would be in high demand and add increased pressure to the Fund. If the DWP were expecting claimants to maintain an online account and claimants are unable to, then this is a fault of the system and NYLAF shouldn't be letting the DWP off the hook. Additionally there are many places applicants can use a phone*

or access the internet. It would also be impossible to ensure that sure that the award was used for its intended purposes.

What criteria do you think would be appropriate in order to become an authorised agent?

- It was commented that signing up to the Memorandum of Understanding would be sufficient for new agencies.
- One agent raised that the agency must know the client/family in a professional capacity.

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

- More information on the process after the request has been submitted would benefit the customer.
 - o *Please note that application status can be checked for all applications under the 'My Applications' section of the online form.*
- The vulnerability criteria to be made public to applicants in advance.
 - o *This has now been made available on the public website.*
- Budgeting support in various forms was commonly mentioned. This ranged from consenting to a call back on the application form to completing a budgeting plan before an application can be authorised.
 - o *This is an option that we are currently considering with Connect Assist. If it is possible, then the details will be in the next update.*

Is there anything else you wanted to raise; any other issues or comments about either the future of the NYLAF or past experience?

- It was noted that some individuals were simply counting down the days for their next NYLAF application.
 - o *As in the point made in response to question two above we acknowledge that in rare instances this may be the case. We ask all agents to be vigilant, ask for evidence of circumstances if you have reason to doubt the applicant or report it if you believe the individual is behaving fraudulently.*

Following the group discussion Neil Irving (Assistant Director, Policy and Partnerships) gave a presentation on a recent audit that had just been completed on the NYLAF. This had been requested by the NYLAF Governing Group to check that the measures introduced since the fraud incident would prevent any future occurrences. The Fund had been rated as substantial assurance, the second highest rating.

An action had been identified to increase the security of transmission of personal documentation sent by authorised agents to Connect Assist. Documentation is required to verify age, residency and financial circumstances of 5% of non-emergency applications which are randomly selected for audit. An internal assessment of the risk has been completed and it is deemed to be a low likelihood of occurring.

Neil then invited suggestions on a number of options, such as simply accepting the risk, introducing postal submissions, and using egress secure transfer. A number of agents already use egress and recommended this option. It was asked how it would impact on smaller organisations. Neil highlighted that the software is free to download and there would be no cost required, however, there might be a cost in terms of any training staff or volunteers required to use the new software.

While attendees at the workshop favoured using egress we would welcome any further suggestions of possible processes, systems or software that could be used to resolve this issue.

We will be updating the Memorandum of Understanding in the near future to take account of this change.

Authorised Agency – Expression of Interest Form

In order to ensure that those most in need get the maximum support when they need it, the North Yorkshire Local Assistance Fund works with a number of key voluntary, community and statutory services as authorised agents.

An authorised agent is an organisation that can make direct referrals to the Local Assistance Fund on behalf of applicants. The Fund's authorised agents will be:

- in contact or working with the client, and have knowledge of their needs/circumstances;
- able to help identify those in most need who may be eligible for the Fund;
- able to provide confirmation verifying that they have had sight of the required forms of evidence of identification and of need.

The Fund now has an expression of interest form that can be completed by those organisations interested in becoming authorised agents. Please note that all expressions of interest are considered on a case by case basis. There will be times when the Fund already has sufficient coverage and numbers of authorised agents in a particular area or vulnerability category.

If you wish to find out more about becoming an authorised agent please contact nylaf@northyorks.gov.uk

Update to the Memorandum of Understanding

As mentioned earlier in the update the Memorandum of Understanding is currently being updated to take into account recommendations from a recent audit of the Fund.

The Memorandum of Understanding is a short partnership agreement between authorised agents and the Council which sets out what each organisation can expect of the other while working to support vulnerable individuals and families through the NYLAF.

It is anticipated that the revised Memorandum of Understanding will be sent out in the New Year and then reviewed annually in case any further changes or additions need to be made. Please could you ensure that you read, sign and return this document to us promptly after you have received it.

NYCC Customer Service Centre and Connect Assist Christmas Opening Times

With Christmas fast approaching (!) please see below for the opening times of the NYCC Customer Service Centre and Connect Assist between Christmas and New Year for NYLAF calls.

Fri 23rd	Sat 24th	Sun 25th	Mon 26th	Tues 27th	Wed 28th
8am-5.30pm	Closed	Closed	Closed (BH)	Closed (BH)	8am-5.30pm

Thurs 29th	Fri 30th	Sat 31st	Sun 1st	Mon 2nd	Tues 3rd
8am-5.30pm	8am-5.30pm	Closed	Closed	Closed (BH)	8am-5.30pm

Awards will be processed as normal and while we don't expect any significant issues it is important to note that during this busy holiday period there may be delays in the time it takes for items to reach applicants.

Enquiries: nylaf@northyorks.gov.uk
Public information: www.northyorks.gov.uk/nylaf
Partner updates: www.nypartnerships.org.uk/nylaf