Title:	**Further Education Learner Support and Hardship Funds Policy 2026/27**
Type:	Policy
Purpose:	To inform staff and students of the financial support available to students, including those in exceptional circumstances and the application process.
Scope:	This policy applies to all further education students
Responsibility:	The Vice Principal HR & Student Services is responsible for this policy. The Director Student Services is responsible for the monitoring of the policy.

Legal Context:

- 16 to 19 Bursary Fund guide: 2026 to 2027 - GOV.UK
- Adult skills fund: funding and performance management rules 2026 to 2027 - GOV.UK
- Equality Act 2010
- Advice: funding rules for 16 to 19 provision 2026 to 2027 - GOV.UK
- Free meals in further education funded institutions guide: academic year 2026 to 2027 - GOV.UK

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1. General Policy Statement

Learner Support funding is designed to help students overcome individual financial barriers to participation they face, and the College must ensure funds go to those who genuinely need support. The College will assess the actual needs of all individual students in addition to eligibility when awarding bursary funding. This means the College will provide funding to each student who meets the eligibility criteria based on their actual participation needs and will not make flat or fixed rate payments to students that do not reflect the actual costs they face.

Bursary funding is to help eligible students with essential costs of participating in college, such as travel to and from college (for students who live 1.5+ miles from their campus of study) or to buy essential books, equipment, or specialist clothing (protective overalls, for example) that are required for their study programme. These are items a student would otherwise need to pay for to participate. The Student Services Team will consult with Heads of School at the start of the academic year to obtain information about essential books, equipment and uniform requirements for each course and funded will be allocated based on this information.

The bursary fund is not intended to provide learning support – for example, counselling, mentoring or extra tutoring - or to support extra-curricular activities that are not essential to the students' study programme or to provide living costs support.

The College will operate four Learner Support funds during the 2026/27 academic year

- The 16 to19 Bursary Fund
- Free Meals
- The 19+ Discretionary Learner Support Fund
- The Advanced Learner Loans Bursary

The College will also operate a Hardship fund to support students overcome specific barriers to participation that are not covered through the Learner Support Funds.

The College will manage the number and size of bursary awards to keep with our budget. Funds will only be allocated to eligible students whilst funds remain. Students are encouraged to apply and submit supporting evidence as soon as possible.

2.Eligibility criteria: All 16 to 19 bursaries (Enhanced and Discretionary)

The 16 to 19 Bursary Fund provides financial support to help students overcome specific barriers to participation so they can remain in education.

There are 2 types of 16 to 19 bursaries:

- Bursaries for defined vulnerable groups referred to as the Enhanced / Vulnerable Bursary
- Discretionary bursaries.

2.1 Age

A student must be aged 16 or over but under 19 on 31 August 2026 to be eligible for help from either of the 16 to 19 bursary funds in the 2026 to 2027 academic year.

Students aged 19 or over are only eligible to receive a 16-19 discretionary bursary if they are continuing on the same study programme they began aged 16 to 18 (19+ continuers) or have an Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan.

These 2 groups of aged 19+ students can receive a 16-19 discretionary bursary while they continue to attend education (in the case of a 19+ continuer, this must be the same programme they started before they turned 19), as long as their eligibility continues and are assessed as needing the support to continue their participation in education.

Students aged 19 or over are not eligible for bursaries for enhanced/vulnerable groups.

The 16 to 19 bursaries will generally only pay students aged 16 or over. However, in exceptional circumstances where under 16 students are on funded 16 to 19 study programmes at the college, discretion can be used to pay bursaries to younger students. For example, where a student is following an accelerated study programme.

Bursary funds will not be awarded to students enrolled at another institution, where that institution also receives public funding for the student, for example, students aged 14 to 16 who are attending college as part of their key stage 4 programme at a local school/academy.

Students aged under 19 enrolled on higher education qualifications are not eligible for support from the 16 to 19 Bursary Fund.

2.2 Eligible education provision

Students must be participating in provision that is subject to inspection by a public body that assures quality (for example Ofsted). The provision must also fall into one of these groups:

- funded directly by Department for Education (DfE) or by DfE via a local authority
- otherwise publicly funded and lead to a qualification (up to and including level 3) accredited by Ofqual or on the list of qualifications approved for funding

Students on apprenticeship programmes, or any waged training, are employed, rather than in education. They are not eligible for the 16 to 19 Bursary Fund.

Non-employed students aged 16 to 19 who are participating in a King's Trust Team Programme are eligible to receive the bursary in the same way as any other student participating in an eligible, publicly funded course.

We do not expect students on distance learning provision to need help from the bursary fund because they do not have the kinds of costs the bursary is intended to cover (travel, equipment, and uniforms, for example). In the rare instances where an such a student does require financial help, the college may be able to provide support in-kind. An example could be providing a temporary travel pass to attend exams if living 1.5+ miles from the campus where the student is attending the exam.

2.3 Residency

Students must meet the residency criteria in Advice: funding rules for 16 to 19 provision 2026 to 2027 - GOV.UK This document also specifies the evidence the college must see and retain for audit to confirm eligibility for post-16 funding (and therefore meet the residency criteria for bursary fund eligibility).

2.4 Accompanied asylum seeking children (under 18 with an adult relative or partner)

Generally, asylum seekers are not entitled to public funds. Accompanied asylum seeking children (those under 18 with an adult relative or partner) and those aged 18 and above are entitled to education, but not to public funds. If they are destitute, they can apply to the Home Office (HO) for suitable housing and cash for essentials, but they are not eligible for other income.

As long as an asylum seeker has not had their application for asylum refused, the college can provide in-kind student support such as books, equipment, or a travel pass. The college is not permitted to give cash to any asylum seeker unless they are an unaccompanied asylum-seeking child (UASC).

2.5 Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children

Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children do not receive cash support from the HO and are the responsibility of the local authority. They are treated as looked after children and are eligible for a bursary for vulnerable groups ('in care' group), if there is a financial need.

When these young people reach legal adulthood at age 18, institutions must consider their immigration status. If the asylum claim is decided in their favour, the local authority must provide them with the same support and services as they do care leavers. As such, they continue to be eligible for a bursary as a student from a vulnerable group until they reach the upper age limit.

Where an asylum claim is not supported, the individual may not be able to stay legally in the UK. When asylum claims have been fully heard/the appeals process exhausted, an individual has no entitlement to public funds (with a few exceptions where the withdrawal of support would be seen as a breach of human rights).

3. Bursaries for defined vulnerable groups (Enhanced / Vulnerable Bursary)

Students who have a financial need **and** are in one the defined vulnerable groups listed below, can apply for a bursary for vulnerable groups. The defined groups reflect that these students are unlikely to be receiving financial assistance from parents or carers, so may need a greater level of support to enable them to continue to participate.

Students will be awarded the amount of support they need to participate based on an assessment of the types of costs they have and **must not** be automatically awarded £1,200.

Bursary funding is to help eligible students with essential costs of participating in college, such as travel to and from college (for students who live 1.5+ miles from their campus of study) or to buy essential books, equipment, or specialist clothing (protective overalls, for example) that are required for their study programme. These are items a student would otherwise need to pay for to participate. The Student Services Team will consult with Heads of School at the start of the academic year to obtain information about essential books, equipment and uniform requirements for each course and funds will be allocated based on this information.

The college must ensure students are eligible for the bursary for defined vulnerable groups in **each year** they require support.

The defined vulnerable groups are students who are:

- in care
- care leavers
- receiving Income Support (IS), or Universal Credit (UC) because they are financially supporting themselves or financially supporting themselves and someone who is dependent on them and living with them, such as a child or partner
- receiving Disability Living Allowance (DLA) or Personal Independence Payments (PIP) in their own right as well as Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) or UC in their own right*

  **Students must be in receipt of DLA or PIP AND ESA or UC to be eligible – receipt of DLA or PIP alone does not meet the criteria*

The bursary for vulnerable groups can pay up to £1,200 per year to a student participating on a study programme that lasts for 30 weeks or more if they need that amount of support. Students on study programmes of less than 30 weeks will be paid a pro-rata amount, as appropriate based on an assessment of their actual needs.

Students will only receive the amount they actually need to participate, and the college will not automatically award students £1,200 if they do not need the full amount.

The college may decide that although a young person may be eligible for a bursary because they are in one or more of the defined vulnerable groups, they do not have any actual financial need. This might be because their financial needs are already met and/or because they have no relevant costs. **The college can refuse a student's application on this basis.**

Equally, the college can pay a bursary to a vulnerable group student of more than £1,200 if there is an assessed need for extra help to remain in education. Any payments over £1,200 will be paid from the discretionary bursary allocation. If a student is eligible for support under one of the defined vulnerable groups but is allocated the maximum amount of funding available under this category the College will use discretion and top up any funded needed above the £1200 cap from its Discretionary Bursary fund without conducting household income assessments, if sufficient funds remain.

The College must ensure they hold auditable records that evidence the type, purpose, and amount of all funding awarded.

Free Meals has its own eligibility criteria and a student who meets the criteria for a defined vulnerable group bursary is not automatically eligible for a free meal.

3.1. Defining in care and care leavers

The 16 to 19 Bursary Fund defines 'in care' as children looked after by a local authority on a voluntary basis (section 20 of the Children Act 1989) or under a care order (section 31 of the Children Act 1989). Section 22 of the Children Act 1989 defines the term 'looked after child'.

A 'care leaver' is defined as:

1. 16 and 17 who was previously looked after for a period of at least 13 weeks consecutively (or periods amounting to at least 13 weeks), which began after the age of 14 and ended after the age of 16 - they do not need to have entered care after their 14th birthday to be eligible, they can have entered care at any age, but they must have spent at least 13 weeks in care after their 14th birthday before leaving after the age of 16; or
2. a young person aged 18 or above who was looked after prior to becoming 18 for a period of 13 weeks consecutively (or periods amounting to 13 weeks), which began after the age of 14 and ended after the age of 16

Only students who meet this definition are eligible if they have a financial need and have provided evidence of in care or care leaver status.

3.2. Foster care, including privately arranged foster care

A young person placed with a foster carer by the local authority, including where the foster carer is on the books of an independent fostering agency, is classed as looked after. They meet the criteria for the 'in care' vulnerable group where they need financial support to participate.

A child who is privately fostered (in other words, a private arrangement is made between the parent and the person who will care for the child) is not classed as a looked after child and is not eligible for the bursary for vulnerable groups.

In some instances, a young person may have been in the care of the local authority and then left care via achieving permanence through an order such as a Special Guardianship Order. In these circumstances, the young person is defined as having left care so is now a care leaver. They must meet the definition of a 'care leaver' in full (so, the period of weeks and age range set out above). If they do, they are eligible for help from the bursary for vulnerable groups, where they need financial support to participate.

Institutions decide which students receive discretionary bursary support and how much they receive, based on their own policies. Foster carers' income does not need to be taken into account before awarding support. Eligibility for the bursary for defined vulnerable groups is based on the student meeting the criteria for one of the defined groups. All students must have their need for support assessed individually, to determine the type and amount of support they need, but vulnerable groups students are not subject to a household income assessment and institutions should not consider foster carers income though must consider what costs may be covered by the local authority, to avoid double-funding. If a student is eligible for support under one of the defined vulnerable groups but is allocated the maximum amount of funding available under this category the College will use discretion and top up any funded needed above the £1200 cap from its Discretionary Bursary fund without conducting household income assessments.

3.3. Universal Credit

Universal Credit (UC) is replacing some benefits for example, Income Support and Employment and Support Allowance for new claimants. This means young people aged 16 to 18 from now on, are not in receipt of these legacy benefits. However, students aged 19 to 25 but funded from the 16 to 19 budget (such as those with an EHC plan) may still be in receipt of those legacy benefits. UC award notifications do not include information on the benefits they replace.

The College must ensure a student is receiving UC in their own right to support themselves and dependents living with them, such as a child or partner.

Bursary funds awarded to a student should not form part of the UC assessment undertaken by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). How DWP treat any funding for education depends on whether the student is undertaking advanced full-time education. It is unlikely that 16 to 18-year-olds will be in advanced full-time education as they are generally on study programmes at level 3 or below.

Under UC, any educational award which is paid under a scheme to enable persons under age 21 to complete a course of non-advanced education (which will include the 16 to 19 Bursary) does not need to be treated as grant income for UC purposes – as provided under reg 68(7) of The Universal Credit Regulations 2013.

3.4. Evidence of eligibility – Vulnerable Bursary

The college must obtain proof that students meet the criteria for the bursary for vulnerable groups in full. In other words, that they are in receipt of the specified benefits in their own name or that they fully meet the definitions for in care/care leavers. The college will ask for evidence from each student in each year they require support and will retain copies for audit purposes.

For example:

- for students who are in care or a care leaver, written confirmation of their current or previous looked-after status from the relevant local authority – this is the local authority that looks after them or provides their leaving care services. The evidence could be a letter or an email but must be clearly from the local authority.

- for students in receipt of UC or IS, a copy of their UC or IS award notice. This must clearly state that the claim is in the student’s name/confirm they are entitled to the benefits in their own right. The evidence must not state any conditions that prevent them from participating in further education or training.

- for students receiving UC/ESA and DLA and PIP, a copy of their UC claim from DWP. Evidence of receipt of DLA or PIP must also be provided

UC claimants should be able to print off details of their award from their online account or provide a screenshot to the institution.

Students can also contact their UC Work Coach (or relevant Benefit Office if they are receiving getting IS or ESA) and ask them for help in providing evidence of receiving benefits.

The college will only submit a funding claim to the DfE when the appropriate evidence has been seen and verified to confirm that the student is eligible for the bursary for vulnerable groups, and an assessment of the actual amount of financial help the student needs to participate has been made.

3.5. Students on part time study programmes

Students on a study programme that lasts less than 30 weeks are likely to need less support than a student on a longer programme. The actual amount is dependent on:
- your assessment of the level of support they require
- evidence of their specific financial needs

The College will consider the number of hours involved in a student's study programme. A student studying for around 16 hours a week is likely to have greater costs than a student studying for 4 hours a week, for example.

Some study programme costs may be 'fixed' in nature, for example, course equipment costs.

3.6. Students eligible for a vulnerable bursary who don't require bursary funding

In some cases, a young person might meet the eligibility criteria for a bursary for vulnerable groups, but their financial needs are already met, they have no relevant costs or they do not need the maximum award.

For example a student:

- attending specialist residential provision that covers their educational costs in full
- taking a distance learning programme who has no financial barriers to participation (for example, they don't have any travel costs or meal costs)
- in the care of the local authority whose educational costs are covered in full by the local authority
- who is financially supported by their partner

In these circumstances, the college can refuse the student's application. The college will explain to the student and/or the student's parents or support worker the aim of bursary funding and why they are not awarding any bursary.

The college will make it clear in our bursary information that there is a possibility of no award or a limited award. This ensures all parties understand that meeting the criteria for a bursary for vulnerable groups does not automatically mean funding will be given.
The college will also ensure application forms avoid any terminology such as 'guaranteed bursary' or wording such as 'you will automatically get a bursary of £1,200 if you are in one of the defined groups'.

3.7. Recycling bursaries for vulnerable groups funding

The College may accrue some unused funding for bursaries for vulnerable groups during the academic year. For example, if a student leaves early after only receiving part of their bursary or the College does not pay the full amount to a student because they did not meet the agreed conditions. The College is expected to recycle this funding to use to support other eligible students.

The College can add any funding for bursaries for vulnerable groups they have claimed, but no longer need, for eligible students to their discretionary bursary allocation from 1 May 2027 or alternatively if the College cannot fully use these funds, the funds can be returned to the DfE in the third funding claims window for year end reconciliation.

Should the College incorrectly claim any funding for bursaries for vulnerable groups (for example, submitting a funding claim without verifying a student meets the criteria) be made, the College will try to recycle the funding on subsequent funding claims. However, if the College has no other students who are eligible for a bursary for vulnerable groups, the incorrectly claimed funds cannot be added to their discretionary bursary allocation because they were claimed in error. Instead, the College must report the funds to the DfE in the third funding claims window for year end reconciliation and funds will be recovered.

4. 16-19 Discretionary Bursaries

The College will make discretionary bursary awards to students to help them overcome the individual barriers to participation they face. Support may be provided for the following:

- help with the cost of transport (where the student lives 1.5 or more miles from their campus of study)
- essential books and equipment
- contributions towards the costs of attending industry placements – if not covered by the award made for travel and essential equipment
- UCAS application fees
- top-up to Care to Learn funding for childcare, where necessary and appropriate
- essential field trips to achieve or support study programme goals or course objectives
- free meals allowance.

The College will decide which students receive a discretionary bursary through published eligibility criteria set out below. The level of support each student receives will depend on the students individual circumstances and their actual financial need.

There is no set limit for the amount of discretionary bursary that can be awarded to students. The College can award discretionary bursaries equal to or higher than the bursary for vulnerable groups maximum as long as they have clearly identified an individual student requires this level of funding. The College must manage the number and size of discretionary bursary awards to keep with our budget.

4.1. Using household income and establishing individual student need

The College must ensure that the bursary policy is designed to ensure funding reaches those students who are most in need of financial support. The College will use household income to help establish the amount of support awarded to a student. This will be used in conjunction with other factors, such as distance to travel from home to College, the number of dependent children in the household and the actual participation needs of the student.

For 2026/27, the College will operate a two-tier priority system for the discretionary element, based on household income as follows:

- Priority 1 - Net Household income of less than £35,000 per year
- Priority 2 - Net Household income between £35,000 and £42,000 per year

Those students falling into the Priority 2 category will be advised that they will be placed on a ‘waiting list’ and the position reviewed at October half term. Applicants in this group will be awarded financial help after the October half term, subject to sufficient funds remaining. An element of the funds will be top sliced for any new students (e.g. January starts)

Household income eligibility for the discretionary bursary will not take child benefit, child tax benefit, DLA/PIP or Carers Allowance into account, but will still be recorded on application.

In exceptional circumstances where students are unable to provide evidence of household income the college will discuss and document these circumstances. A decision will be made on whether to provide financial support through the discretionary bursary fund on the basis of the students’ circumstances. Requests for exceptional circumstances will be made by the Head of Campus Life or Caring Services Coordinator for approval by the Frontline Services & Admission Manager or Student Services Director.

4.2. Evidence of eligibility

The College must obtain proof that students meet the household income eligibility criteria for the bursary. The College will ask for evidence from each student and retain copies for audit purposes.

For example:

- Last 3 months payslips
- Last 3 Months Full Universal Credit Statements
- P60s
- Self-Employment Accounts
- Recent benefit awards notifications dated within 6 months of application if not UC
- Recent Bank Statements

For 16-18 students, household income checks will be conducted once at the beginning of the students study programme. Rather than conducting annual household income checks following the first check students will be asked to sign and date a self-declaration form to confirm that their household circumstances have not changed.

4.3. Awards

- Students will be issued with a termly payment equivalent to that of a termly bus pass or through the Travel West Midlands App should it be appropriate if they live 1.5+ miles from their campus of study. Provision of this fund is dependent on continued attendance on the students study programme at the college. If a student is withdrawn subsequent termly payments will be withheld or if they receive a bus pass through the Travel West Midlands Apps, their bus pass will be cancelled the day following their withdrawal. Students will also be provided with support to purchase essential kit and equipment and financial support towards the cost of essential course related trips. The cost of any kit, equipment or trips will be established at the start of the academic year from each of the curriculum areas.

The bursary fund may be used to provide exceptional further help with childcare costs for those young parents (aged 16-19) in receipt of Care to Learn whose costs exceed the scheme's weekly maximum rates. Only childcare provision eligible under the Care to Learn scheme rules can be used and the College must be able to evidence that the maximum amount is being paid under Care to Learn to confirm that a top up is required. Any top up paid must be made in line with Care to learn funding rules and paid directly to the childcare provider, not to the student.

The College will retain a small emergency fund from the allocation to support students who face exceptional circumstances during the year due to a change in situation that impact on their ability to participate in education.

Should funds permit, the 16-19 discretionary bursary will be used to purchase laptops for loan to students who meet the eligibility criteria for this fund, as detailed above.

4.4. What the bursary fund cannot be used for

Blanket or flat rate/fixed rate payments:

- to all students who meet the discretionary bursary eligibility
- to students in particular income bands
- to students whose families are in receipt of particular benefits
- To all students who are in the defined vulnerable groups

All payments must be based on the actual financial needs of each student.

The bursary fund is not intended to

- provide learning support – services that institutions give to students – for example, counselling, mentoring or extra tutoring
- support such as servicing laptops and tablets
- support extra-curricular activities where these are not essential to the students' study programme goals and course objectives
- support the costs of foreign/overseas field trips where the content can be found within England at a much cheaper cost and/or to support the costs of fields trips that are not an essential part of a student's study programme goals/qualification/s or course objectives.
- Support general household incomes/general living costs (rent, bills, Wi-Fi etc.). This is out of scope and any such payments would be subject to the Social Security Amendment (Students and Income-related Benefits) Regulations 2000

The college is not permitted to use the bursary fund in any way that would give them a competitive advantage over other institutions. Examples include:

- fees for access to facilities in the institution
- block subsidy of the canteen
- block subsidy of transport, or support for travel for all students regardless of family incomes
- block provision of equipment, material or books
- making bonus payments to reward attendance or achievement
- payments to support students' general living costs

The college must not use the bursary as a way of incentivising attendance or as a marketing tool to encourage students to choose their institution over another.

4.5. Rules on unspent bursary funds

The DfE permits institutions to carry unspent bursary funds over to the next academic year. Institutions must continue to use any funds carried forward to support students in line with the funding rules as set out by the DfE 16 to 19 Bursary Fund guide: 2026 to 2027 - GOV.UK. Institutions cannot add the funds to general funds.

Where institutions are given a single overall allocation that includes funding for both free meals and the discretionary bursary, they can carry forward funds from both schemes. Institutions may use this funding for either free meals or discretionary bursary payments in the new academic year.

Institutions must fully use any unspent funds for either discretionary bursary or free meals before using their new academic year allocation.

Institutions cannot carry forward funding for discretionary bursary and/or free meals funding for more than one year and must return unspent funds prior to, and including, the 2024 to 2025 academic year or any funds that are over our current year allocation value.

Institutions must report the unspent funding to the DfE via their customer help centre. The DfE encourage institutions to do this as soon as they are aware however they must report it no later than 31 March each year.

5. Industry Placement Fund

Some students may find themselves facing financial difficulties due to incurring extra participation costs, for example, because they need to pay for additional travel to their placement. These students may only need support for a brief period. Any additional costs will be assessed by the Frontline Services Team and awards made accordingly.

6. Free Meals

The 1996 Education Act requires maintained schools and academy sixth forms to provide free meals to disadvantaged students who are aged over 16. In the 2014 to 2015 academic year the requirement was extended to disadvantaged students following further education (FE) courses at the range of FE funded institutions. Funding agreements place a legal duty on institutions to comply with the requirement.

6.1. Eligibility Criteria

6.1.1. Age

A student must be aged 16 or over but under 19 on 31 August 2026 to be eligible to receive a free meal. Students aged 19 or over are only eligible to receive a free meal if they are continuing on a study programme they began aged 16 to 18 (‘19+ continuers’) or have an EHC plan.

These 2 groups of aged 19 plus students can receive a free meal while they continue to attend education (in the case of a 19+ continuer, this must be the same programme they started before they turned 19), as long as their eligibility continues.

The following groups of students are not eligible for free meals in further education:

- students aged between 14 and 16 (these students are already covered by FSM provision)
- students aged 19 or over at the start of their study programme, unless they have an EHC Plan or are a 19+ continuer
- apprentices, including those with an EHC Plan

6.1.2. Eligible benefits

Free meals are targeted at disadvantaged students. Free meals in FE defines disadvantage as students being in receipt of, or having parents who are in receipt of, one or more of the following benefits:

- Universal Credit
- support under part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999

A student is only eligible to receive a free meal when they, or a responsible adult on their behalf, have made a successful application to the institution where they are enrolled.

Households in receipt of Income-related Employment and Support Allowance or the guarantee element of Pension Credit may also be entitled to a meal.

Students must also satisfy the residency criteria set out in [16 to 19 Bursary Fund guide: 2026 to 2027 - GOV.UK]

6.2. Verification of student eligibility

The college is responsible for assessing applications for free meals. All students applying for a free meal for the first time in the 2026 to 2027 academic year must submit an application to the college.

The Department for Education (DfE) provides an electronic Eligibility Checking System (ECS) that enables local authorities to check FSM eligibility on behalf of institutions.

It is important that institutions and local authorities understand that the legal gateway (section 110 of the Education Act 2005) that enables the department to obtain benefit information held by DWP and HRMC for checking eligibility is limited to FSM. Information from the ECS cannot currently be used to check entitlement for free meals for post-16 students.

As part of the application, the college will ask the student (or their parent/guardian) to provide evidence of the award of the qualifying benefits. This might be an award notice or letter from DWP or HMRC. The college will operate a combined application form and process for free meals and the 16 to 19 Bursary Fund.

6.3. Awards

Eligible students will have their free meal allocation added to their Student ID card for use in the refectory at a rate of £4.65 per day. Free School Meal allowance will be refreshed each day a student attends college and will cover the cost of a meal deal from the College Refectory. Allowances will only be available for days when students are timetabled to be in college. Allowances will not be added during non-teaching weeks and any funds that are not used by the end of each day will be removed and not carried over. In exceptional circumstances, the College may allocate cash payments to students if for valid reasons they are unable to use the College refectory. Cash payments will be made based on days of attendance within a payment period.

6.4. Raising awareness of free meals

The College will promote the availability of free meals to ensure students are aware of the eligibility criteria and encourage students who are eligible to apply.

6.5. Unspent free meals funds

The DfE permit institutions to carry unspent free meals funds over to the next academic year. Any funds carried forward must continue to be used to support students. They cannot be added to general institution funds.

Where institutions are given a single overall allocation that includes funding for both free meals and the discretionary bursary, they can carry forward funds from both schemes. The funding may be used for either free meals or discretionary bursary payments in the new academic year.

Institutions must fully utilise any unspent funds for either free meals or discretionary bursary before using their new academic year allocation.

Institutions cannot carry forward funding for free meals and/or discretionary bursary meals funding for more than one year and must return unspent funds prior to, and including, the 2024 to 2025 academic year or any funds that are over your current year allocation value.

Institutions must report the unspent funding to the DfE via their customer help centre. The DfE encourage institutions to do this as soon as they are aware however they must report it no later than 31 March each year.

7. 19+ Discretionary Learner Support

19+ Learner support is available to provide financial support for individuals with a specific financial hardship preventing them from taking part/continuing in learning. Awards are set out in the 'categories'.

- Hardship funding – financial support to enable financially disadvantaged learners to participation learning
- 20+ childcare funding – for learners aged 20 or older on the first day of learning who are at risk of not starting or continuing learning because of childcare costs
- Care to Learn top up for 19-year-olds
- Residential Access funding – to support ESFA funded ASF learners (set out in the who we fund section) where they need to live away from home in order to access provision
- ICT devices and connectivity - to support disadvantaged learners who cannot undertake online delivery

The fund will be used for learners who are in clear need, to enhance their learning and ensure they are not disadvantaged with regard to engagement in their study programme and enrichment activities.

7.1. Eligibility Criteria

7.1.1 Using household income and establishing individual student need

The College must ensure that the bursary policy is designed to ensure funding reaches those students who are most in need of financial support. The College will use household income to help establish the amount of support awarded to a student. This will be used in conjunction with other factors, such as distance to travel from the institution, the number of dependent children in the household.

For 2026/27, the College will operate a two-tier priority system for the discretionary element, based on household income as follows:

- Priority 1 - Net Household income of less than £35,000 per year
- Priority 2 - Net Household income between £35,000 and £42,000 per year

Those students falling into the Priority 2 category will be advised that they will be placed on a 'waiting list' and the position reviewed at October half term. Applicants in this group will be awarded financial help after the October half term, subject to sufficient funds remaining. An element of the funds will be top sliced for any new students (e.g. January starts)

The College must obtain proof that students meet the household income eligibility criteria for the bursary. The College will ask for evidence from each student and retain copies for audit purposes.

For example:

- Last 3 months payslips
- Last 3 Months Full Universal Credit Statements
- P60s
- Self-Employment Accounts
- Recent benefit awards notifications dated within 6 months of application if not UC

- Recent Bank Statements

Household income eligibility for the discretionary bursary will not take child benefit, child tax benefit, DLA/PIP or Carers Allowance into account, but will still be recorded on application.

In exceptional circumstances where students are unable to provide evidence of household income the college will discuss and document these circumstances. A decision will be made on whether to provide financial support through the discretionary bursary fund on the basis of the students' circumstances. Requests for exceptional circumstances will be made by the Head of Campus Life or Caring Services Coordinator for approval by the Frontline Services & Admission Manager or Student Services Director.

7.1.2 Age

A student must be aged 19 years old or older on 31 August 2026 to be eligible for help from the 19+ discretionary learner support fund in the 2026 to 2027 academic year.

7.1.3 Eligible education provision

Students must be participating in qualifications, units or learning aims that are listed on find a learning aim or on the DfE list of qualifications approved for funding and be funded directly by the DfE or by the DfE via a local authority. If a student enrols onto a full cost course, they will not be eligible for 19+ Discretionary bursary funding.

7.1.4 Residency

Students must fulfil the residency requirements set out by the DfE in the who we fund section of Adult skills fund: funding rules 2026 to 2027 - GOV.UK

Unless otherwise stated, individuals must be ordinarily resident in the UK on the first day of learning to meet the residency requirements.

7.2 Awards

The fund will be used to support the costs of travel (for students who live 1.5+ miles from their campus of study). If a student is withdrawn subsequent payments will be withheld or if they receive a bus pass through the Travel West Midlands Apps, their bus pass will be cancelled the day following their withdrawal.

Students will also be provided with support to purchase essential kit and equipment and financial support towards the cost of essential course related trips. The cost of any kit, equipment or trips will be established at the start of the academic year from each of the curriculum areas. Funding may in exceptional circumstances be provided for support with domestic emergencies and emergency accommodation provided by others.

In exception circumstances and where a supporting statement is provided by the Caring Services Manager or Caring Services Coordinator and approval is given by the Frontline Services & Admission Manager or Student Services Director the College may award a Free School Meal allowance to 19+ students who meet the bursary eligibility criteria from its 19+ Discretionary bursary fund.

The bursary fund may be used to provide exceptional further help with childcare costs for those young parents (aged 19) in receipt of Care to Learn whose costs exceed the scheme's weekly maximum rates. Only childcare provision eligible under the Care to Learn scheme rules can be used and the College must be able to evidence that the maximum amount is being paid under Care to Learn to confirm that a top up is required. Any top up paid must be made in line with Care to learn funding rules and paid directly to the childcare provider, not to the student.

The College will retain a small emergency fund from the allocation to support students who face exceptional circumstances during the year due to a change in situation that impact on their ability to participate in education.

Should funds permit, the19+ discretionary bursary will be used to purchase laptops for loan to students who meet the eligibility criteria for this fund, as detailed above.

7.3 Hardship

Hardship funds can be used for the following:

- course-related costs, including course trips, books and equipment (where costs are not included in the funding rate)
- support with domestic emergencies and emergency accommodation provided by others, or by providing items or services or cash direct to the learner, this can be in the form of a grant or repayable loan provided by you
- transport costs (but not make a block contribution to post-16 transport partnerships or routinely fund transport costs covered in the local authority's legal duty for learners of sixth-form age)
- examination fees
- accreditation fees, professional membership fees and any fees or charges due to external bodies
- your registration fees

In exceptional circumstances, hardship funds can be used to assist with course fees for learners who need financial support to start or stay in learning.

If an asylum seeker is eligible for provision, learner support may be provided in the form of course-related books, equipment, cash payments or a travel pass.

7.4 20+ childcare

Childcare funding can only be used to pay for childcare with a childminder, provider or childminder agency, registered with Ofsted.

Childcare funding must not be used to:

- fund informal childcare, such as that provided by a relative
- set up childcare places or to make a financial contribution to the costs of a crèche

Learner support funds may be used to "top up" childcare costs for 19 year old learners receiving care to learn funding if their costs exceed the weekly maximum rates for that scheme.

The top up may only be applied to childcare provision eligible under the Care to Learn scheme rules. The provider must hold evidence that the maximum amount is being paid under care to learn to confirm that a top up is required.

Any top up paid must be made in line with care to learn guidance and paid directly to the childcare provider.

Childcare funding cannot be used for those aged 20 years or older to top up childcare payments for those receiving 'Care to Learn' payments.

7.5 ICT devices and connectivity

The funds can support disadvantaged learners who are undertaking classroom or blended learning to continue to participate via online learning where the learner does not have:

- internet access at home, and/or
- a suitable device, for example a laptop or tablet, to compete the necessary online course work

The college will seek to secure value for money when purchasing IT devices and/or internet access including:

- deploying any unused devices before you purchase new ones
- exploring options to access low cost second hand or recycled devices
- avoiding entering long term contract arrangements
- holding a record of actual costs for any IT devices and/or internet access bought for this purpose and make this available to the DfE, if asked

IT devices must only be loaned out to learners and returned at the end of their learning aim to allow them to be re-used by other learners. Learners must sign a declaration, confirming:

- they will return the device when their online learning aim(s) is complete, or if they leave before completing their learning
- they will return the device in the same condition in which they received it

The college will record the following evidence in the learner's evidence pack:

- the outcome of the assessment undertaken to identify the learner's individual needs
- the learner declaration referred to above

8. Advanced Learner Loans Bursary

For the 2026/27 academic year Advanced learner loans are available for individuals aged 19 or above to undertake approved qualifications at Levels 3 to Level 6, at an approved provider in England. Advanced learner loans give individuals access to financial support for tuition costs similar to that available in higher education and are administered by Student Finance England.

The availability of loans at Level 3 for 19 to 23 year-olds does not replace an individual's legal entitlement for full funding for a first full Level 3 qualification or access to full funding through an entitlement where the College holds an ASF funding agreement e.g. for FCFJ funded qualifications

8.1. Eligibility

8.1.1. Using household income and establishing individual student need

The College must ensure that the bursary policy is designed to ensure funding reaches those students who are most in need of financial support. The College will use household income to help establish the amount of support awarded to a student. This will be used in conjunction with other factors, such as distance to travel from the institution, the number of dependent children in the household or whether the young person has additional responsibilities that may mean they need extra help, for example, they are a young carer or a parent.

For 2026/27, the College will operate a two-tier priority system for the discretionary element, based on household income as follows:

- Priority 1 - Net Household income of less than £35,000 per year
- Priority 2 - Net Household income between £35,000 and £42,000 per year

Those students falling into the Priority 2 category will be advised that they will be placed on a 'waiting list' and the position reviewed at October half term. Applicants in this group will be awarded financial help after the October half term, subject to sufficient funds remaining. An element of the funds will be top sliced for any new students (e.g. January starts)

Household income eligibility for the discretionary bursary will not take child benefit, child tax benefit, DLA/PIP or Carers Allowance into account, but will still be recorded on application.

In exceptional circumstances where students are unable to provide evidence of household income the college will discuss and document these circumstances. A decision will be made on whether to provide financial support through the discretionary bursary fund on the basis of the students' circumstances. Requests for exceptional circumstances will be made by the Caring Services Manager or Caring Services Coordinator for approval by the Frontline Services & Admission Manager or Student Services Director.

8.1.2. Age

A student must be aged 19 years old or older on 31 August 2026 and have a loan approved by the SLC to be eligible for help from the Advanced Leaner Loan Bursary in the 2026 to 2027 academic year.

8.1.3. Eligible education provision

Students must be participating in provision that is funded through an Advanced Learner Loan. If a student enrols onto an Advanced Leaner Loan funded course but chooses to self-fund, they will not be eligible for the Advanced Learner Loan Bursary.

8.2. Awards

Funds will be used to support the costs of travel (for students who live 1.5+ miles from their campus of study). If a student is withdrawn subsequent termly payments will be withheld or if they receive a bus pass through the Travel West Midlands Apps, their bus pass will be cancelled the day following their withdrawal.

Students will also be provided with support to purchase essential kit and equipment and financial support towards the cost of essential course related trips. The cost of any kit, equipment or trips will be established at the start of the academic year from each of the curriculum areas. Funding may in exceptional circumstances be provided for support with domestic emergencies and emergency accommodation provided by others.

In exception circumstances and where a supporting statement is provided by the Head of Campus Life or Caring Services Coordinator and approval is given by the Frontline Services & Admission Manager or Student Services Director the College may award a Free School Meal allowance to ALL funded students who meet the bursary eligibility criteria from its ALL bursary fund.

The College will retain a small emergency fund from the allocation to support students who face exceptional circumstances during the year due to a change in situation that impact on their ability to participate in education.

Should funds permit, the Advanced Learner Loan bursary will be used to purchase laptops for loan to students who meet the eligibility criteria for this fund, as detailed above.

8.3. Hardship

Hardship funds can be used for the following:

- course related costs, including course trips, books and equipment (where these costs are not required to be part of the fee)
- transport costs for getting to and from a course
- professional membership fees and any fees or charges due to external bodies related to the course
- exceptional support with domestic emergencies and emergency accommodation provided by others, or by providing items, services, or cash direct to the learner. This can be in the form of a grant or repayable loan provided by you for course related costs

8.4. 20+ childcare

Childcare funding can only be used to pay for childcare with a childminder, provider or childminder agency, registered with Ofsted.
Childcare funding must not be used to:

- fund informal childcare, such as that provided by a relative
- set up childcare places or to make a financial contribution to the costs of a crèche

Learner support funds may be used to "top up" childcare costs for 19 year old learners receiving care to learn funding if their costs exceed the weekly maximum rates for that scheme.

The top up may only be applied to childcare provision eligible under the Care to Learn scheme rules. The provider must hold evidence that the maximum amount is being paid under care to learn to confirm that a top up is required.

Any top up paid must be made in line with care to learn guidance and paid directly to the childcare provider.

Childcare funding cannot be used for those aged 20 years or older to top up childcare payments for those receiving 'Care to Learn' payments.

8.5. ICT devices and connectivity

The funds can support disadvantaged learners who are undertaking classroom or blended learning to continue to participate via online learning where the learner does not have:

- internet access at home, and/or

- a suitable device, for example a laptop or tablet, to compete the necessary online course work

The college will seek to secure value for money when purchasing IT devices and/or internet access including:

- deploying any unused devices before you purchase new ones
- exploring options to access low cost second hand or recycled devices
- avoiding entering long term contract arrangements
- holding a record of actual costs for any IT devices and/or internet access bought for this purpose and make this available to the DfE, if asked

IT devices must only be loaned out to learners and returned at the end of their learning aim to allow them to be re-used by other learners. Learners must sign a declaration, confirming:

- they will return the device when their online learning aim(s) is complete, or if they leave before completing their learning
- they will return the device in the same condition in which they received it

The college will record the following evidence in the learner's evidence pack:

- the outcome of the assessment undertaken to identify the learner's individual needs
- the learner declaration referred to above

9. Appeals Process – All Funding Streams

1. Initial appeals in respect to attendance, levels of support or the eligibility of applicants will be sent in writing to the Front-line Services and Admissions Manager who will respond within 10 working days.
2. Appeals may then be progressed to the Director of Student Services if the student/prospective student wishes to challenge the decision of the Front-line Services and Admissions Manager
3. The decision of the Director of Student Services will mark the end of the appeals process. Further challenges to the decision will be supported by the College's Complaints Policy and Procedures.

10. Payment Process for the Learner Support Fund

The Learner Support funds are intended to remove specific barriers to participation. Institutions can insist that students awarded bursary funds spend them on travel costs, meals during the day, equipment, or any other support that has been identified as necessary to enable them to participate in education. The level of support provided will be detailed in an Award Notification.

The DfE encourages institutions to pay bursaries in-kind rather than cash where possible. This helps ensure that the bursary is spent for the reasons it was awarded. In-kind payments can include travel passes, vouchers or credits for meals, required books and required equipment.

1. Currently the method of payment (BACs, Internal Transfer, Childcare Provider, Online Voucher Code) is chosen by the Frontline Services Team when entering the information onto the database.
2. The Frontline Services Team will allocate payments on a fixed processing date. These will be fixed on the system and disappear once the date has passed.
3. The Frontline Services Team will run a report of payments that fall within these fixed dates and pass to Finance. This report will be authorised by the Director of Student Services, or the Vice Principal HR & Student Services in their absence. This report will be cc'd to the relevant Finance team members responsible for processing payments.
4. Finance to make payment and advise the Frontline Services Team via a Payment Report together with any bounced payments.
5. Finance provides the remittance advice to the childcare provider.
6. In the event of a bounced payment the Frontline Services Team will reverse the allocation. Once correct BAC details have been confirmed they will tick the box to flag payment received and put in a new processing date.
7. Finance will advise the Frontline Services Team of further bounced payments from the bank.
8. The Frontline Services Team will update the payments to the systems using the Payments Report.
9. Processes and Procedures are in place to ensure all those involved with the payment process are aware of their roles and responsibilities

10. Internal audit checks take place each half term to ensure applications and allocations are processed inline with this policy and all other agreed procedures.

11. Monitoring Process for the Learner Support Funds

11.1. Rejections

- All students who apply for funding but do not match the published eligibility criteria will be sent a 'rejection' email which will details the reason for the rejection along with details of the appeals process.

11.2. Attendance checks - all funding streams

- Students who are eligible for funding must achieve 85% attendance apart from confirmed Young Adult Carers who need to achieve a minimum of 75% attendance. This is in recognition that due to their external caring responsibilities they face additional barriers to achieving the required attendance level.
- Authorised absences will not be counted as an absence mark for the purposes of these attendance checks.
- If the student fails to meet this benchmark then funding during the period of absence may be stopped
- If the student has been paid in advance (childcare) the next available month may be stopped
- If a student fails more than 2 months attendance in a row their support for the remainder of the year may be withdrawn

11.3. Withdrawals - all funding streams

- If a student withdraws from their course all further payments will be stopped
- Dependant on the circumstances of the student withdrawal the college reserves the right to request the repayment of support

12. College Hardship Fund

The College offers students in exceptional circumstances access to a hardship fund.

The fund will provide a safety net for students who are in danger of withdrawing from their course. The fund offers short-term financial support to meet travel and personal costs.

12.1. What the fund supports

The fund can be used to provide further education students financial support for food, clothing and toiletries costs and will be supported by the issuing of supermarket vouchers and reconciled with the return of receipts to ensure suitable items are purchased. The fund will also be used for the issuing of Lunch Vouchers to be cashed in at the refectories for a range of meal options. Only with the consent of the Caring Services Manager or Caring Services Coordinator and Director Student Services will cash awards be made from the fund.

This support is reviewed when the student claims state benefits, accesses hostel accommodation or is able to claim from a national scheme for financial support such as the Learner Support Funds.

12.2. Applications

All applications will be supported by a Pastoral Support Officer who will meet with the student and make an initial assessment. Recommendations for financial support are completed using the Hardship application form. Completed hardship application forms are sent to the Frontline Services Manager or the Head of Campus Life or Caring Services Co-ordinator and Director Student Services for approval.