

Learner Support Fund Policy 2025-26

Responsible Senior Manager: Deputy Principal Finance & Facilities

Effective Date: August 2025

Related Policies:

Approved By: Finance & Estates Committee *

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* Under delegated powers



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1. Aim

The aim of this policy is to support potential learners of HSDC, who face genuine financial barriers to participation in learning with essential course-related costs such as transport, books, food or essential equipment (such as overalls/industrial boots, safety goggles, art supplies, dancewear/shoes, etc.) so they can remain in education.

All applications are considered individually. The funds will be granted where a genuine need for assistance has been demonstrated and the learner meets the age and residency eligibility following guidelines issued by the Education and Skills Funding Agency (DFE).

At HSDC (which comprises Alton, Havant and South Downs campuses) the Learner Support Fund is split into

- General and Discretionary Financial Assistance
- 19+ Advanced Learning Loans Bursary (ALLB)
- 16-19 Vulnerable Bursary Fund (VB)

This policy lists the Criteria/Eligibility and 'How to Apply' individually for the above.

This policy lists the Financial Assistance Offered, How Payments Are Made and the Conditions and Appeals Procedure collectively for all the above.

2. Financial Assistance

Financial Assistance is designed to provide support to all full and part time learners aged 16+* who face genuine financial barriers to participation.

Criteria/Eligibility for Financial Assistance

- Must be currently attending a course at HSDC which is funded by the DFE (some courses are exempt. The Finance Department maintains a list of these courses and it is available upon request).
- Aged 16 or over on 31 August 2025 and living with their Parent/Carer who is in receipt of at least one of the benefits listed below:
 - Job Seekers Allowance (where there is an Income-Based payment, not solely a National Insurance Credit)
 - Income Support
 - Working Tax Credit (not solely Child Tax Credit)
 - Pension Credit (Guarantee Credit)
 - Housing benefit
 - Council Tax Support (other than the single person allowance)
 - Employment & Support Allowance (Income-related)
 - Universal Credit (not solely Child Tax element and the total household income must not exceed £32,500 pa. which must include any universal credit payments, wages and benefits received)
- Aged 19 or over on 31 August 2025 and in receipt of at least one of the benefits listed above or an unwaged dependent of someone who is in receipt of such a benefit.
- Full time learners travelling from the Isle of Wight to study at HSDC, will automatically receive college financial assistance towards travel costs due to the expense of travelling over to the mainland. Further financial assistance will be available for those who are in receipt of an income-based benefit. For more details, please speak to an adviser from the Student Travel and Support Office.
- Learners of any age who are enrolled on higher education qualifications are not eligible for support.

- Learners on apprenticeship programmes, or any waged training, are not eligible for the 16-19 Bursary Fund.
- * If learners are aged under 16 but are funded on a 16-19 study programme at HSDC and meet our eligibility criteria, we may use our discretion to fund bursaries to younger learners, for example a bus pass. We cannot fund younger learners who are enrolled at another institution (e.g., a school/local academy), where that institution also receives public funding for that learner.

3. Discretionary Financial Assistance

The Discretionary Financial Assistance scheme provides financial support for full and part time learners in exceptional and severe financial difficulties. It is specifically designed to respond to hardship and Government Priority Groups such as those who may become homeless or experience sudden changes in circumstances. All applications are considered individually, and funds will only be granted where a genuine need for financial assistance has been demonstrated, along with meeting various criteria. The Discretionary Financial Assistance is limited and can only be allocated whilst funding lasts. Assistance cannot be guaranteed in cases of over-demand.

Criteria/Eligibility for Discretionary Financial Support

- A learner must be currently attending a course at HSDC, which is funded by the DFE (some courses are exempt. The Finance Department maintains a list of these courses and it is available upon request). Funding will be prioritised to learners that meet the following priority groups: -
 - a young lone parent, retraining for employment
 - a significant carer for an adult or child relative
 - statutory education was interrupted
 - has a significant diagnosed mental or physical health condition (appropriate evidence is required)
 - dependant on somebody who has been made redundant in the last 12 months and remains unemployed (appropriate evidence of redundancy will be required)
 - in care or have recently left care, have a child protection plan or a Child in Need
 - supervised by a Young Offender Officer
 - Household annual gross income is under £32,500 and there is a proven need for Financial Assistance (appropriate financial evidence such as recent wage slips, bank statements, etc. will be required and any savings must be declared so that a fair financial assessment can take place, support may still be granted if the household income exceeds this, but this will be assessed on a case-by-case basis)
 - Where a referral from the Health & Wellbeing Department is received which is directly related to a safeguarding situation and/or a learner's physical/mental health is at risk.

The Student Travel & Support Department may also be able to offer supermarket gift vouchers to students who are in extreme financial difficulty or who have been referred by the Health & Wellbeing Department for welfare reasons. These vouchers can only be given to a student as a one-off and cannot be given out on regular basis.

4. The 16-19 Vulnerable Bursary Fund (VB)

The Vulnerable Bursary is designed to support any learner who faces genuine financial barriers to participation; the VB provides funding for items such as transport, equipment and uniforms, leaving remaining funding to be allocated as a weekly payment direct into the eligible learner's bank account. This payment will be based on 100% attendance whilst maintaining a good standard of effort and behaviour.

Criteria/Eligibility for the 16 – 19 Vulnerable Bursary Fund.

- A learner may be eligible for a bursary of £1,200 a year if they are aged 16, 17 or 18 on 31 August 2025 and meet *one* of the following criteria.
 - Are in receipt of Universal Credit in their own name 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.
 - Are a Care Leaver or In Care (Local Authority confirmation will be required).
 - Are in receipt of both Universal Credit and Disability Living Allowance/Personal Independence Payment in their own right.

Where a learner is eligible for the VB and is undertaking a course lasting less than 30 weeks, or they are starting later than the planned start date of the course, or their circumstances change during the year and they become eligible part way through their course, the award should be an appropriate proportion of the £1,200.

5. Free Student Meals in Education

Free Student Meals (FSM) are available for all eligible learners for each day the learner attends their study programme or T Level/work experience placement, where appropriate.

The FSM allowance will be uploaded to the learner's college ID card every timetabled day. The allowance can be spent in the college refectories and shop on food and drink only. A cash alternative can be given if learners are going out on a college trip or attending a work placement.

Eligibility for Free Student Meals is as per the current DFE 16-19 Free Meals in Further Education Guidance. To be eligible to receive a Free Student Meal, the learner must be aged 16 or over but under 19 on 31 August 2025 and be in receipt of, or having parents who are in receipt of, one or more of the qualifying benefits. Learners 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 or have an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

A learner is only eligible to receive a free meal when they, or a responsible adult on their behalf, have made a successful application.

6. Care to Learn (C2L)

Care to Learn (C2L) provides funding for childcare to help young parents (defined as those aged under 20) continue in education after the birth of a child. The scheme provides funding for childcare while the young parent is engaged in a study programme and is not able to provide care for their child. It can also help the young parent with any additional travel costs involved in taking the child to the childcare provider.

C2L provides funding for childcare while young parents are on work placements or industry placements, where these are a defined part of the study programme.

The weekly maximum amount for the year is £180 per child per week. These are the maximum rates, with the actual dependent on childcare costs up to the weekly maximum amount.

Eligibility for C2L is as per the current DFE Care to Learn Guidance. To be eligible to receive help towards the cost of childcare, the young parent must be the main carer for the child (and meet criteria for age and residency); the young parents study programme must have some direct public funding, and their childcare provision must be registered with Ofsted. To receive C2L, the young parent, HSDC and the childcare provider must all meet the eligibility criteria in full.

7. 19+ Advanced Learning Loans Bursary (ALLB)

The Bursary is designed to support learners aged 19+ who have taken out an Advanced Learner Loan and face genuine financial barriers to participation.

Criteria/Eligibility for 19+ Advanced Learning Loans Bursary (ALLB)

A learner: -

- must be currently attending a level 3 or 4 course (other than HNC/HND) at HSDC, be aged over 19, and have had a 19+ Advanced Learning Loan approved by the Student Loans Company
- **and** in receipt of at least *one* of the benefits listed below:-
 - Job Seekers Allowance (where there is an Income-Based payment, not solely a National Insurance Credit)
 - Income Support
 - Working Tax Credit (not solely Child Tax Credit)
 - Pension Credit (Guarantee Credit)
 - Housing benefit
 - Council Tax Support (other than the single person allowance)
 - Employment & Support Allowance (Income-related)
 - Universal Credit (not solely Child Tax element and the total household income must not exceed £32,500 pa. which must include any universal credit payments, wages and benefits received)

8. Financial Assistance Offered

The list below is not an exhaustive list but covers the main areas of financial assistance the College offers. Requests for support not included below will be considered on a merit and circumstantial basis only and within the realms of financial affordability.

Financial Assistance Offered	Financial Assistance		Discretionary Financial Assistance	VB	ALLB
	Full time	Part time			
Age group funding applies to	16-23 and 19+ if course is level 2 or under			16-18	19+
Travel between home and college Full time by way of a bus pass or a contribution towards a train pass Part time by way of refunded public transport fares or in some circumstances by mileage	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Specified equipment, clothing relating to the course you are intending to study	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Specified books relating to the course you are intending to study	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Food Vouchers	✓*	✓*	✓*	✓*	
Personal care items (deodorant, toothbrush, toothpaste, etc) assessed on a case-by-case basis	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
UCAS administration fees	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hepatitis B Vaccinations for Health & Social Care Learners if required by the placement provider	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
A contribution towards exam fees, if applicable	✓	✓	✓		
Financial assistance towards childcare costs (learner aged 20+)	✓	✓	✓		✓
A refund of up to £150 for a laptop device (which was purchased to support studying at college)	✓**		✓**		✓**
Refund of travel expenses (capped at a maximum of £50 each) for up to three University Open Day visits. This can be either by mileage if using a vehicle or by using the most economical use of public transport. Alternatively, learners can opt to have up to £50 for an audition fee.	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Educational Visits (day trips/residentials) that are not considered compulsory for all learners to attend, but may be paid for financially assisted learners where there is a strong educational link	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

* Food Vouchers for learners on the Learner Support Funds/Vulnerable Bursary/Discretionary Financial Assistance will be awarded based on the individual's circumstances

** The £150 refund towards a laptop device can only be awarded where a learner is studying on a full-time course and proof of purchase has been supplied. The date of the receipt can be dated from summer 2025, ready for a September start.

The discretionary learner support fund can also be used to purchase supermarket vouchers for those students facing hardship and unable to buy food. Students/parents/carers do not need to be in receipt of benefits or need to apply for

college financial support to receive these vouchers but they can only be given out on an adhoc basis following assessment by the Health & Safeguarding Coordinator.

Isle of Wight Travel

Learners travelling from the Isle of Wight, are eligible to apply for financial help towards the cost of travel, regardless of household income. This is due to the high costs associated with travelling to the mainland. Learners from the Isle of Wight will automatically be entitled to a college-bought bus pass or the equivalent cost, towards a train pass. Additionally, HSDC will also award a refund of up to £300 towards water travel expenses (on production of proof of purchase).

Further financial assistance towards ferry/Hovertravel may also be available if the household is in receipt of an income-based benefit.

9. How to apply

Details of how to apply can be found on the College website under the Student Travel and Support section. There is the option to apply online via a secure link or paper applications are available from the Student Travel & Support office at all campuses.

All applications are treated fairly and confidentially and per funding body prevailing rules and regulations.

10. How Payments Are Made

Methods of payment will be largely electronic into a confirmed Bank Account or can be discussed as appropriate to individual circumstances.

Any refunds for essential course related costs (uniform, books, etc.) can only be processed with a receipt/proof of purchase. Refunds can only be given after lessons have started in September and the learner is attending their course.

Where there is proven financial hardship and the learner/parent/carer cannot afford any upfront costs, the College may be able to purchase some items direct from the supplier. No purchases will be made until lessons have started in September and the learner is attending their course. Items purchased by the College will be delivered to the College.

11. Conditions

- Learner Financial Assistance is provided by the DFE; this is a limited sum of money that offers no guaranteed right to assistance.
- Any equipment purchased remains the property of HSDC.
- The following conditions will be clearly indicated to the learner of the funding award on the application form; Financial Assistance is granted on the following conditions; there is a proven need for Financial Assistance, that attendance records are good, and college expectations in line with the HSDC standard are being met. If at any time, attendance, work or behaviour is unsatisfactory, the funding may be withdrawn or suspended.

- The information and proof of benefit/income provided must be correct and complete to the best of the learner/parent/carer's knowledge. Giving any false or incomplete information which may lead to wrongfully claiming financial help from the College, may result in any future assistance being stopped and any incorrectly paid funds being recovered. Using false information may result in a referral to the police.
- HSDC will process data related to applications for financial support in accordance with the learner's Learning Agreement. HSDC is committed to protecting personal information in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).
- Learners cannot apply for Financial Assistance, VB or ALLB if they are: -
 - Under 16 at 31 August 2025 (with the exception of home-schooled 14-16 year olds)
 - Enrolled on a Higher Education course
 - On a waged Apprenticeship
 - In Prison or a Young Offender Institution serving a custodial sentence, have been released from a custodial sentence on a temporary licence or have been remanded to a secure institution.

12. Appeals Procedure

If you are dissatisfied with the result of your application, you may appeal stating your reasons. Appeal requests must be made either in writing or by email to:

Finance Manager
HSDC
College Road
Waterlooville
Hants PO7 8AA
Tel: 023 9387 9999
Email: finance@hsrc.ac.uk

The information within this policy is correct at the time of publication but is subject to change as and when the DFE release and update the funding guidelines for 2024/2025.