



## DSA reforms – Information Session Questions and Answers

February 2024

Please see below responses to questions submitted in advance of, and following our DSA Information Sessions which took place Tuesday 6 February.

If a specific question does not appear it is because multiple questions on the same topic were submitted and we have included one overall response.

Please note, student finance policy and eligibility criteria are set by Ministers at the Department for Education (DfE) and devolved administrations of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. We are not able to answer policy questions on behalf of the DfE or the devolved administrations.

### THE NEW DSA SERVICE

#### **Q. How will students locate assessment centres once the look up tool is removed?**

**A.** New students applying for the DSA under the new service model, are no longer required to find their assessment centre. They will be proactively contacted by the supplier to arrange a needs assessment: either face-to-face or online, whichever the student prefers. Where a student chooses a face-to-face appointment, the supplier will provide information for them to select their closest venue, and their confirmation will contain the relevant travel information and confirm any additional requirements, such as parking information.

From 26 February 2024, for students who have received their DSA1, but not yet selected a Needs Assessment Centre they should enter their postcode in the look-up tool on GOV.uk, and the contact details for either Study Tech or Capita will be provided.

#### **Q. What reassurance have the new providers given to guarantee students have access to face-to-face assessments through the medium of Welsh throughout the whole of Wales?**

**A.** Where applicable, SLC has obtained assurances that the contractors can deliver in line with the Welsh Language Standards appropriate to this service.

#### **Q. The student's preferred language for new DSA system application – does this include British Sign Language (BSL) in light of the recent British Sign Language Act 2022?**

**A.** If a student selects an in-person needs assessment they will be able to specify any special requirements they may need to access the needs assessment including a BSL interpreter. The supplier will also be able to review the students' needs via their disability evidence. If, for example, the students notes that they are Deaf, but does not select BSL in their requirements, the supplier can proactively check if BSL is needed before the assessment is booked.

#### **Q. Communication channels mentioned in the session included text-chat and secure messaging, will students be able to phone and speak to a person?**

**A.** Yes. If a student doesn't want to engage with an online channel, they will have the option of contacting the supplier via an alternative channel including by telephone.

#### **Q. Will students have to work through knowledge base systems or any automated chatbot systems when dealing with SLC, Study Tech or Capita?**

**A.** No, customers will not be required to use knowledge base systems or chatbots. Our customer research suggests that the online booking facility used by both suppliers will be favoured by a significant majority of students. However, if the

student doesn't want to engage with an online channel, they will have the option of contacting the supplier via other alternative channels including by telephone.

**Q. Will there be a timescale for Capita/Study Tech to contact students from the date of the DSA1 and DSA2 letters, and will this be stated to the student so they know when they should hear-by.**

**A.** The suppliers will provide students with access to online booking platforms and digital notifications will be used to prompt customers to take action where required. If a student doesn't want to engage online, they will have the option of contacting the supplier via another channel. The supplier will follow up with the student at regular intervals if they have not booked a needs assessment within 3 days of them providing the welcome email and booking link.

**Q. Currently the equipment repair timeline is 3 days for a loan why has this expanded to 5?**

**A.** This is not correct. The 3-day timeframe reference is from the point of collecting the broken equipment however suppliers are expected to try and fix the issue remotely and then onsite before collection. Our new 5-day timeframe for loan equipment to be provided from the point the issue is raised is therefore faster than the current process.

In addition, under the new model, the suppliers will have access to a wider technical support team and a greater volume of loan items so the repair and or supply of loan item will be quicker. Any loan equipment provided must be of the same standard and capabilities as the students' original, including any relevant assistive software.

**Q. When a student gets a loan laptop while theirs is in repair, will it have the same assistive software installed as their usual laptop?**

**A.** Yes. As above, any loan equipment provided must be of the same standard and capabilities as the students' original, including any relevant assistive software.

**Q. What the contingencies are should Study Tech and Capita not be able to fulfil their quota for assessments or technology training?**

**A.** We have been working closely with both suppliers to prepare for the transition to the new service arrangements. As part of this process, we require suppliers to complete thorough readiness checks to provide assurance that all the relevant requirements, including adequate provision of assessments and assistive technology training, imposed on the suppliers under the framework agreements are complete.

SLC will closely monitor the end-to-end service and will take proactive action to mitigate any potential issues or concerns.

**Q. Will the suppliers be complying with accessibility standards?**

**A.** The suppliers are required to adhere to accessibility standards including compliance with Web Content and Accessibility Guidelines. SLC will continue to closely monitor and review compliance against these standards.

**Q. What will the processing KPI's for Study Tech and Capita be for queries and Needs Assessment reports?**

**A.** Needs Assessment Reports (NAR) are expected to be made available to SLC within 5 working days from when the Needs Assessment has been undertaken (excluding those where the customer has requested to review the NAR). SLC will be closely monitoring this through our formal performance management arrangements.

[www.gov.uk/slc](http://www.gov.uk/slc)



Customer and SLC emails are expected to be responded to within two working days.

**Q. I understand that for students there will be one point of contact for their DSA journey. Can you please clarify whether this means that the AT training provider (Study Tech or Capita) will be informing NMH providers of the student's learning needs assessment?**

**A.** NMH is not within scope of the new framework and as such, the existing process remains unchanged. Students will continue to be provided with the contact details of the recommended and approved NMH suppliers on their DSA2 letter.

Suppliers are expected to continue to recommend and source NMH provision for students in accordance with the respective funding body guidance. New guidance for selecting NMH has been produced in collaboration with DfE and the Welsh Government which is available at:

- <https://www.practitioners.slc.co.uk/exchange-blog/2019/november/guidance-for-assessment-centres/>
- <https://www.studentfinancewales.co.uk/practitioners/guidance-for-assessment-centres/>

**Q. Which sector groups will form the advisory body?**

**A.** The following organisations are members of SLC's new DSA Quality Committee:

Thomas Pocklington Trust, Disability Rights UK, Student Minds, National Deaf Children's Society and the British Dyslexia Association. We will keep the membership and remit of the DSA Quality Committee under review as per existing policy for all of our forums, committees, and stakeholder groups.

**Q. In the case of a student contacting an 'old centre' that is still operating for further recommendations, how will the 'old centre' know if a Paid Review has been undertaken, which means the FR should be dealt by either Study Tech/Capita. What are your new processes to ensure the correct organisation is engaging in the work?**

**A.** If an existing centre is unsure in this instance, please contact SLC for clarification.

**Q. What do you mean when you refer to 'student self-service' and what will that look like from 2025?**

**A.** When we refer to 'self-service' this means providing customers with additional options to find information and answers themselves via a range of channels without having to contact SLC or the supplier if they don't want to. For example, our customer research suggests that the new online booking approach which will be offered by Study Tech and Capita, will be favoured by a significant majority of students. However, if the student doesn't want to engage with an online channel, they will have the option of contacting SLC and the supplier via alternative channels, such as telephone or email.

**Q. How will the two providers or SLC conduct a system to ensure assessors and trainers receive adequate training on the software/equipment that are available. Will there be mandatory CPD which can be provided by product suppliers- more so in terms of specialist software/equipment such as that for students with VI/HI?**

**A.** Suppliers must meet the requirements set out in tender process which include:

- The supplier must have the capability to assess the broad range of disabilities and ensure customers are allocated to appropriately skilled needs assessors.
- The supplier must ensure that new needs assessors/ AT trainers undertake supervision by experienced needs assessors/AT trainers for a minimum of 5 sessions before undertaking sessions on their own. A record of mentoring must be stored and provided to SLC if requested.
- The supplier must ensure they have policies in place to ensure that staff conducting NAs and delivering AT training are appropriately skilled and trained and that they complete a minimum of 25 hours of appropriate and relevant CPD every year.
- The supplier must perform quality assurance against robust internal quality assurance practises and share results with SLC on a monthly basis.
- The supplier should be a Disability Confident Supplier or be working towards being a Disability Confident Supplier within the next 24 months.
- The supplier should ensure that all staff dealing directly with the customer has, or will receive within 6 months, disability awareness training. This training should incorporate deaf awareness.

As part of SLC's ongoing audit and assurance activities, we will continue to validate that the suppliers are meeting these requirements.

**Q. With the new system (from 26<sup>th</sup> Feb), will Universities still be sent copies of the Student's Needs Assessment Reports and DSA2 letters? We find this information useful. (In future, will students need to log in and upload from a portal, rather than being sent copies by email?)**

**A.** Copies of the DSA2 and Needs Assessment Report will continue to be shared with HEPs where consent to share has been provided by the student.

In 2025, we will be delivering further improvements to transform our systems and the application experience for students applying for DSA. This will enable SLC, DSA suppliers and students easy and secure access to the information they need. Importantly, in this phase, all students applying for DSA will have access to online applications, self-service capability and additional contact channels. Students will still be able to choose their preferred channel of communications, for example email or telephone if preferred.

**Q. We will supply in-house support (Mentoring, Tutoring etc) to our students. We haven't had any information about being a supplier of support - should we have had any?**

**A.** NMH is not within scope of the new framework and as such, the existing process remains unchanged.

Suppliers are expected to continue to recommend and source NMH provision for students in accordance with the respective funding body guidance. Needs Assessors will be required to continue to source two quotes from registered NMH providers who are able to meet the needs of students. SLC will also continue to review and approve all needs assessment recommendations and will select the NMH supplier with the most competitive quote, where there are no exceptional circumstances.

New guidance for selecting NMH has been produced in collaboration with DfE and the Welsh Government which is available at:

- <https://www.practitioners.slc.co.uk/exchange-blog/2019/november/guidance-for-assessment-centres/>
- <https://www.studentfinancewales.co.uk/practitioners/guidance-for-assessment-centres/>

NMH suppliers can contact the Study Tech and Capita to raise awareness of the support they offer if they wish, by contacting:

- Capita at [DSA@Capita.com](mailto:DSA@Capita.com)
- Study Tech at [opportunity@study.tech](mailto:opportunity@study.tech)

**Q. Where a student has applied for DSA previously for an UG course and then reapplies as they are starting a PG course will they be assigned to one of your new suppliers?**

**A.** A student will only be assigned to Study Tech or Capita where a funded review of needs is necessary. Where a student has recently graduated and is proceeding directly to PG study in a similar subject area, the DSA study needs assessment that was undertaken in respect of the UG course may in many cases be sufficient to identify the student's support needs for the PG course. This means, for example, that the student could continue to receive NMH support without the necessity of a further DSA study needs assessment.

**Q. In the DSA transformation timeline slide, you mention a transformed digital service from 2025 with "secure digital communication between SLC, suppliers, partners and education providers". Will this "secure digital communication" be in the form of API's between SLC, suppliers, partners and education providers systems?**

**A.** The precise nature of the secure digital communication will depend on how the various parties wish to access it. There will be direct APIs between SLC and suppliers, and for education providers there may be APIs and/or access to an online portal. Further information will be provided in due course.

**Q. Can you please comment on what will be the procedure where a disabled student is also a member of staff at the HEI / other body providing their support (such as CAPITA), such as NMH and AT/Training**

**A.** There will be a Register of Interests policy and procedure in place and SLC will be working closely with the suppliers to review how they intend to manage any identified conflicts. SLC is aligned to government policy and standards in relations to Conflict of Interest (COI) and our COI policy has been shared with suppliers.

## TRANSITION ARRANGEMENTS

### **Q. What date will the GOV.uk website postcode search for assessment centres will be taken down?**

**A.** From Monday 26 February the postcode look-up tool on GOV.uk will no longer be available in its current form; all existing Needs Assessment Centres will be removed from the search functionality.

The look-up tool itself will, however, be available for a temporary period following the transition to the new service, for those customers who received their DSA1 letter before 26 February, but haven't yet selected a Needs Assessment Centre. These customers will be supported by Study tech or Capita. The student should enter their postcode, as per the current process, and the contact details for either Study Tech or Capita will be provided.

### **Q. Will existing assessment centres be able to assess students that have already contacted them to book an assessment once the postcode search webpage has been taken down?**

**A.** Yes. Where students have received confirmation of their eligibility for DSA (via their DSA1 letter), and have booked, or are in the process of booking their needs assessment, then the needs assessment can take place if the preferred centre is still operational and able to do so.

For students who have received their DSA1, but not yet selected a Needs Assessment Centre they should enter their postcode in the look-up tool on GOV.uk, and the contact details for either Study Tech or Capita will be provided.

### **Q. With regard to the ergonomic assessments for equipment requirements, will the assessment still be done face to face with the student as has always been required in the past?**

**A.** Yes. There is no change to this process.

### **Q. If a student wishes to have a face-to-face Needs Assessment meeting, where will this be held? Are Study Tech and Capita going to provide facilities for these meetings, and if so, in what locations?**

**A.** For new students applying for DSA, once they have their eligibility confirmed by SLC, the onus is no longer on them to go to the postcode look up tool and find their nearest needs assessment centre. Instead, the student will be assigned to either Study Tech or Capita, and they will proactively contact the student to arrange an assessment. This will help speed up the process for the student. (As above, however, from 26 February 2024, for students who have received their DSA1, but not yet selected a Needs Assessment Centre they should enter their postcode in the look-up tool on GOV.uk, and the contact details for either Study Tech or Capita will be provided).

Students will continue to be able to choose if they want a face-to-face assessment or an online assessment.

The suppliers have suitable locations and premises for face-to-face assessments across all geographical zones. SLC will be conducting regular visits to these assessment centres and carrying out audits to assure the suitability of such locations. The location strategy of both suppliers will also be kept under review to ensure it is meeting students' needs. Through our ongoing engagement with students, we will also be validating with them that the travel time to get to their assessment centre is convenient.

**Q. Are suppliers still able to process outstanding order after the 26th February, 2024. Whereby a DSA2 has been provided by the student; and**

**Q. What happens with DSA2s for NAR's or ergonomic reports recently submitted before the new contract date, and will assessors be getting replies to queries already sent after the Access Centre ceases to operate or ceases trading?**

**A.** At the point of transition, customers that have already received their needs assessment and their subsequent DSA2 letter but have not yet arranged their assistive technology and training, can arrange and receive support from the existing supplier(s) named in their correspondence and so the eQuote portal will continue to be available for a period of time to allow this (we are currently planning for this to be available until the end of May). There is no specific cut-off date for supplying the required technology and training in this instance.

We recognise that there may be a period of time from when a student receives their DSA2 letter, to them contacting a supplier to arrange provision of services. We also understand that some existing suppliers may be considering their arrangements in the DSA market as a result of the procurement reforms.

We expect suppliers named in students' DSA2 letters to provide services following contact from the student, for at least up to three months from the date on the DSA2 correspondence, where possible. If a supplier is unable to provide these services for whatever reason, they should contact SLC at [DSA\\_Requests@slc.co.uk](mailto:DSA_Requests@slc.co.uk) as soon as possible. We will direct the student to an alternative supplier for support.

**Q. Will there be delays to the DSA process during the transition phase and are there any contingency measures in place to mitigate this?**

**A.** We process DSA applications as quickly and efficiently as possible and will continue to closely monitor handling times to ensure students receive the support they are entitled to in a timely way.

Under the new service arrangements, SLC will be able to ensure a consistent and quality experience for students. Needs Assessment Reports provided by Study Tech and Capita, for example, will be more consistent which will enable SLC to process reports more efficiently.

Under the new service model, students will have one supplier who has ownership of their end-to-end support for their needs assessment, assistive technology and assistive technology training, and they will proactively support students through their DSA journey. As a result, the overall student experience will be improved, and the time taken for students to get their support in place will be reduced.

**Q. Is there a cut off point for when needs assessments can no longer be delivered by non-contract holders and instead should be referred to SLC? (For example, if a student was in possession of a DSA1 letter dated prior to the transition date but didn't do anything with it initially, then decided to book 1/2/4/6/12 months later, and wanted to use a centre recommended by a friend so got in touch directly, not via the postcode search, from what date should an assessment centre not deliver the assessment)?**



**A.** Where students have received confirmation of their eligibility for DSA (via their DSA1 letter), and have booked, or are in the process of booking their needs assessment, then the needs assessment can take place if the preferred centre is still operational and able to do so.

From 26 February 2024, for students who have received their DSA1, but not yet selected a Needs Assessment Centre or started the process of booking a Needs Assessment they should enter their postcode in the look-up tool on GOV.uk and the contact details for either Study Tech or Capita will be provided to book a Needs Assessment.

Therefore, from the 26 February, existing assessment centres should not onboard new customers they hadn't heard from prior to this date. SLC will continue to closely monitor the date provided on Needs Assessment Reports in relation to the customer's DSA1 correspondence.

**Q. Is there a cut off point for when invoices from non-contract holders will no longer be paid by SLC for needs assessment services delivered?**

**A.** There is no specific cut-off date. The invoicing process will remain the same, and the email addresses used to submit and query invoices will remain active. We will continue to process invoices as promptly as possible.

**Q. Is there likely to be specific guidance on directing the 24/25 postgraduate cohort towards the new contractors in anticipation of their role in supporting these students? Or do we simply refer them to SFE for further guidance on their support for next year?**

**A.** There is no change for postgraduate (PG) students. Their needs assessment sets out the support they require for their entire course. They will continue to apply for DSA each year, as per the existing process; and should continue to re-apply via paper application. PG students would only be impacted if their existing supplier leaves the market, and in this scenario, they should contact SLC if they require additional support.

**Q. Is there standard guidance issued by SLC for Access Centres that are giving notice to close as a result of the transition to new contractors?**

**A.** Yes. If any supplier is planning to exit the DSA market, please contact SLC, DfE and the Welsh Government as early as possible so that we can ensure appropriate arrangements are in place to support the students currently using your services. Please contact:

- SLC at [DSA\\_Requests@slc.co.uk](mailto:DSA_Requests@slc.co.uk);
- DfE at [disabled.studentallowances@education.gov.uk](mailto:disabled.studentallowances@education.gov.uk)
- Welsh Government at [studentfinancedivision@gov.wales](mailto:studentfinancedivision@gov.wales).

On receipt of notification, SLC will issue further information and guidance about this process. To help ensure continuity of support for customers, please advise SLC how long you intend to continue to provide DSA services: [DSA\\_Requests@slc.co.uk](mailto:DSA_Requests@slc.co.uk).



**Q. Can SLC provide the anticipated volumes of 23-24 students accessing assessments through the current system?;**

**Q. How many DSA1 letters have been sent out to 23-24 students that have not led to a student accessing a needs assessment. How many DSA1 letters have been sent out in previous years that did not lead to the delivery of a needs assessment? and;**

**Q. How many students issued with DSA 1 letters pre-26th February 2024 are SLC awaiting NARs for?**

**A.** In the previous three academic years, on average, 85% of DSA customers who have been confirmed as eligible went on to book a Needs Assessment. In 23/24, we have made around 68k customers eligible and approximately 65% have had a Needs Assessment thus far, which is line with the same point in the last academic cycle. We continue to closely monitor application volumes and where students are in their DSA journey as we move towards the transition.

**Q. Is there a cut-off date for when funded reviews can no longer be delivered by non-contracted assessment centres and should instead should be referred back to SLC?**

**A.** From 26 February 2024, existing suppliers will no longer be able to undertake funded reviews, and students should be advised to contact SLC who will assign them to Study Tech or Capita. Where possible, however, existing suppliers are expected to continue to support returning students for the duration of their course with ongoing customer services. This includes any non-funded reviews covered under the single fee arrangement, such as after care support or any issues managed by the current assistive technology suppliers via insurance and warranty.

**Q. Are DSA1 letters being issued as normal right up until the postcode search is turned off?**

**A.** Yes. Please note, there is no change to this part of the process under the new service model. Customers will continue to apply to SLC, we will process their application and assess their eligibility, and we will continue to issue DSA1 correspondence confirming their eligibility.

**Q. How should existing Needs Assessment centres, who are remaining open beyond the launch of the new service on the 26th February, obtain quotes for goods and services?**

**A:** We are currently planning for the eQuote portal to remain available until the end of May. We will confirm the exact date the portal will no longer be available and what process should be followed in its absence, in due course.

For any NMH or taxi quotes not covered via eQuote, the existing processes and solutions that Needs Assessment centres use to obtain pricing for these services will continue as normal.

## SUPPORTING EXISTING STUDENTS

**Q. What will be put in place to manage the queries of students already in the system who currently get directed back to their assessor?**

**Q. What provisions are in place for supporting students who have been provided equipment in previous years.**

**A.** We understand that some students may seek further assistance from their existing assessor or assistive technology supplier. Where possible, existing suppliers are expected to continue to support returning students for the duration of their course with ongoing customer services. This includes any non-funded reviews covered under the single fee arrangement, aftercare support or any issues managed by the current assistive technology suppliers via insurance and warranty.

Suppliers who continue to provide support to existing SFE and SFW students must continue to comply with the standards outlined by DfE and Welsh Government. If any provider is unable provide these services for whatever reason, they should contact SLC at [DSA\\_Requests@slc.co.uk](mailto:DSA_Requests@slc.co.uk) as soon as possible. SLC will direct students who require support to an alternative supplier.

Following transition to the new service model, where a student requires a fundable review and any subsequent equipment, this will be provided by Study Tech or Capita.

**Q. If a student requires a review of needs, due to a new diagnosis, and their original NAC is no longer operational, who will carry this out, and how will they have the original information regarding that student?**

**A.** Following the transition to the new service model, where a student requires a fundable review and any subsequent equipment, this will be provided by Study Tech or Capita. The student will be advised to contact SLC in the first instance and we will assign them to one of the suppliers. As per our existing process, if required, the new supplier will ask the customer to share their Needs Assessment Report (NAR) or medical evidence with them. In exceptional circumstances, where consent has been provided, SLC will provide this information to the new supplier.

**Q. If a student needs an amendment to their DSA taxi travel, for example if they are going into placement, who will do this? and;**

**Q. Where a student's Needs Assessment Centre has closed and they need minor things like more NMH hours or a taxi amendment, you said "in house" what do you mean by that? At SLC or asking the HEI to provide quotes/justification?**

**A.** By 'In-House' – we mean SLC.

The expectation is that the student's original Needs Assessment Centre will continue to provide support with any additional recommendations for taxis and NMH where required.

However, if that Needs Assessment Centre is no longer operational, students should contact SLC by telephone or email. For Disability Advisors within HEP's supporting students, please also continue to contact us by telephone or email.

Our priority is to ensure these matters are resolved as quickly as possible. We will review the circumstances of each case and firstly consider if we can turn the request around in-house (SLC) without referral elsewhere, for example, in instances that require only minor updates to support, such as additional taxi journeys or where more hours are needed

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for previously approved NMH services. However, if the student requires a broader review of their support package, or, consideration for new support previously not recommended, the student will be assigned to Study Tech or Capita – who will then provide the required services. We have designed this referral process in collaboration with the suppliers and they are aware of the need to support these students promptly and with care.

**Q. Will 23/24 students will be affected and assessed through the new process?**

**A.** At the point of transition to the new service, most students applying for DSA in the 2023/24 academic year will have already received their DSA1 letter confirming their eligibility. For those customers who have not yet received their DSA1 letter, their needs assessments, assistive technology and training services will be provided by Study Tech or Capita.

On the date the service arrangements begin, students could be at different stages of their journey. Slide 16 in the *DSA Information Session* Presentation and accompanying script, sets out the process for supporting students in different scenarios.

**Q. For non-contracted suppliers, under the new system will there be a quality assurance framework or guidance document produced for submitting non-funded reviews and updates to SLC?**

**A.** Suppliers who continue to provide support to existing SFE and SFW students must continue to comply with the guidance outlined by DfE and Welsh Government.

- Student Finance England: <https://www.practitioners.slc.co.uk/exchange-blog/2019/november/guidance-for-assessment-centres/>
- Student Finance Wales: <https://www.studentfinancewales.co.uk/practitioners/guidance-for-assessment-centres/>

**Q. Will SLC produce any communication guidance for non-contracted assessment centres to use when communicating with their students about the change, to ensure consistency of message across centres? and;**

**Q. How are SLC communicating the change to all existing students who have been through the current system?**

**A.** Students will continue to apply for SLC as they do now and we will process their application and assess their eligibility. We will then assign the customer to Study Tech or Capita.

There is no change for existing students and they are not required to take any action. Existing students will only be impacted if their original DSA provider exits the market, and the student subsequently needs further support. We proactively contact students to let them know if their supplier is no longer providing support – and provide our contact details should they require assistance. In this scenario, we will assign the student to another supplier to ensure they get the support the need.

We also share guidance with any supplier leaving the market asking them to notify students of their intention to close and to provide them with our DSA Team’s contact details, so we can continue to support them.

**Q. Is there a process for assessment centres to follow, where students make contact about non-contract holding ATSP providers who have either closed down or fail to deliver a quality service. What process and communication would SLC like assessment centres to use?**

A. If a student's supplier is not able to provide support for whatever reason, or if it has left the market, please advise the student to contact SLC and we will ensure they receive the support they need from an alternative supplier.

## INVOICING

**Q. We received some questions from existing suppliers about the processing of invoices, specifically:**

- **Whether payments would be made for assessments already undertaken prior to the new service starting;**
- **If the invoicing process will remain the same, and;**
- **If invoices would be processed more slowly as a result of resources being diverted.**

A. The invoicing process will remain the same, and the email addresses used to submit and query invoices will remain active.

We will continue to process invoices as promptly as possible, and if there is any impact of the new reformed model it is likely to be a positive one as the invoicing process with the new suppliers is further improved and automated.

## NON-MEDICAL HELP AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST

**Q. What is in place to manage Conflict of Interest?**

A. SLC is aligned to government policy and standards in relations to Conflict of Interest (COI) and our COI policy has been shared with suppliers.

**Q. As NMH providers can we back claim for NMH support sessions provided to students who have been confirmed by DSA as meeting eligibility criteria but, through no fault of their own, are experiencing delays in being assessed and being notified of their award?**

A. By exception, it is possible for SLC to consider reimbursing any interim NMH support that a HEP may have put in place whilst customers are progressing their application. The NMH support would need to be fundable via DSA and subsequently be recommended by the Needs Assessor within the customer's NAR. For Student Finance England (SFE) customers, the supplier being used would have to be registered, with costs being charged within the associated bands.

**Q. In what (if any) circumstances will you accept recommendations from a Disability Officer at the student's HEI in respect of NMH support amendments for students with an existing award? In particular, would you accept recommendations for students with an existing DSA award who are looking for an increase in their NMH hours?**

A. Generally, all recommendations for DSA support must be provided by Needs Assessors. However, in cases where a student's Needs Assessment Centre is no longer operating, we will review the circumstances of each case and firstly consider if we can turn the request around in-house (SLC) without referral elsewhere. For example, in instances that require only minor updates to support, such as additional taxi journeys or where more hours are needed for previously approved NMH services.

However, if the student requires a broader review of their support package or consideration for new support previously not recommended, the student will be assigned to Study Tech or Capita and they will provide the required services. We have designed this referral process in collaboration with the suppliers and they are aware of the need to support these students promptly and with care.

[www.gov.uk/slc](http://www.gov.uk/slc)



**Q. Where can we find the exact boundaries of the Capita and Study Tech areas? Although only a small provider, the area we serve appears to be across a boundary, but we are not sure. Clarification would be very welcome so that we can ensure the relevant assessment centres have our details.**

Office for National Statistics (ONS) Data links postcode to region and you can look within the ONS data on their website. You can also check using [Search \(findthatpostcode.uk\)](https://www.findthatpostcode.uk), for example – by entering your postcode to find your region and mapping that to the relevant supplier.

Generally, students will be assigned to Study Tech or Capita based on the contact address they provide to SLC. If their eligibility for DSA is confirmed following term start, the student will be assigned to a framework supplier based on their higher education provider (HEP) address.

Where a supplier has provided a needs assessment, they will also be responsible for supplying the assistive technology, assistive technology training and supporting the student with after care for the duration of their course, even if they are located in a different zone after the assessment has been conducted. Therefore, please contact both suppliers if you wish to do so.

**Q. You mentioned the Conflict of Interest around NMH support on the call. Could you also detail how any conflicts of interest will be handled?**

**A.** SLC require Study Tech and Capita to maintain a comprehensive and up-to-date statement of all interests. This is to ensure that all DSA funding is being distributed in a fair, open and transparent manner. We expect both suppliers to consider the management of any conflicts of interest in a balanced and appropriate manner. Steps must be taken to ensure that any decision making can be seen to be impartial, transparent and robust. Any steps taken must be clearly documented and details must be provided within Conflict of Interest statements and shared with SLC.

Where appropriate, both suppliers will provide data on request from SLC that validates their compliance and governance related to COI.

## OTHER

**Q. We also received a question noting that some students being assessed may be under 18 and classed as children rather than young adults. We were asked if all assessors under the new assessment model will have the correct DBS checks in place and allow parents to be present (in person or virtually) if this is requested.**

**A.** We can confirm that the new contracts require both suppliers to ensure that appropriate Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks will be conducted with renewal in line with government guidelines, and that they make provision to allow parents to be present at any needs assessment, whether in person or virtually.

**Q. As part of the initial tender process, the overall cost of supply was a contributing factor to the award, since the publication of the award a number of software developers have increased pricing drastically, what measure are in place to ensure value for money is maintained from the pricing originally submitted for the tender compared to the new pricing of AT.**

**A.** SLC will conduct bi-annual reviews of actual supplier charge rates compared to market benchmark rates and compared to submitted tender rates.

These processes enable SLC to remain in control of the costs associated with the provision of assistive technology.

**Q.** How has the testing phase with Study Tech been undertaken?

**A.** To support the testing of the new model with Study Tech a separate parallel process was put in place to handle applications to be assigned to them. Given the relatively low numbers involved, this used a very small amount of SLC's overall operational capacity. Students going through the pilot process would have been processed more quickly as a dedicated team supported these cases and the new service model reduces the time it takes for support to be put in place, as Study Tech proactively supported the student through the end to end process for the provision of Needs Assessment, Assistive Technology Provision and Assistive Technology Training.

**Q.** Do Higher Education Providers (HEP) have a designated contact person?

**A.** Generally, students will be assigned to Study Tech or Capita based on the contact address they provide to SLC.

If their eligibility for DSA is confirmed following term start, the student will be assigned to a framework supplier based on their higher education provider (HEP) address. This is to minimise the number of students who may have otherwise been allocated to a supplier who is no longer best placed to offer a face-to-face assessment, if this is requested by the student. Students on distance learning courses will always be allocated to a supplier based on their home address.

Where a supplier has provided a needs assessment, they will also be responsible for supplying the assistive technology, assistive technology training and supporting the student with after care for the duration of their course, even if they are located in a different zone after the assessment has been conducted.

This means that Higher Education Providers will have students enrolled who are supported by both Study Tech and Capita. Contact details:

- Study Tech: HEP Liaison, Email: [jane.fraser@study.tech](mailto:jane.fraser@study.tech)
- Capita: HEP Liaison, Email: [dsahepmanager@capita.com](mailto:dsahepmanager@capita.com)

**Q.** When will all applications will go online?

**A.** We expect to begin introducing our transformed digital service, including access to online applications for all DSA students from 2025. We will confirm a date in due course.