

WBTC Bursary Fund and Free Meals Policy 2025-26

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1. Introduction

ESFA Guidance (May 2024) has been used to update this policy

The Bursary Fund helps 16- to 24-year-olds continue in ESFA funded education, where they might otherwise struggle for financial reasons. It is made up of two parts – government bursaries of up to £1200 a year for the most vulnerable young people and a discretionary fund for schools, colleges, academies, training providers and local authority learning providers to distribute to other students who face genuine barriers to participation.

The Bursary Fund has two elements:

1. A vulnerable learner bursary of up to £1,200 a year for young people age 16-19 in the following defined vulnerable groups:

young people in care or care leavers

young people claiming [Income Support](#) or [Universal Credit](#) in their own right

disabled people getting [Employment and Support Allowance](#) and [Personal Independence Payment](#) in their own right
2. Discretionary awards made by providers to young people in ways that best fit the needs and circumstances of their learners. Discretionary bursary awards should be targeted towards those young people not eligible for the vulnerable learner award who face the greatest financial barriers to participation; such as the costs of transport, meals, books and clothing or equipment.

2. Accessing Vulnerable Student Bursary

If a young person is eligible for a vulnerable learner bursary they should declare this on the application form and WBTC will apply to the learner bursary support service (SBSS) on their behalf. WBTC will support the learner with supplying the appropriate evidence for the claim.

Providers are free to determine the assessment criteria for eligibility for discretionary bursaries and the frequency of payments for all awards.

3. WBTC policy for discretionary Bursary payments

WBTC operates 2 programmes to which this policy applies:

16-24 (19-24 with an EHCP) Study Programmes including Traineeships – variable length programmes including part time and full time planned hours.

Shorter NEET reduction programmes with variable hours/weeks of attendance.

Both programmes are aimed at young people who may experience a variety of obstacles to engaging in education/employment. Furthermore there is a high proportion of additional learning needs and social disadvantage associated with the target groups.

4. Assessing real need

It is proven that the payment of an allowance such as a Bursary significantly impacts on attendance and engagement among these learners. The allowance enables learners to overcome obstacles that prevent engagement such as travel costs and food. Many of the client group come from highly disrupted backgrounds in which the evidencing of household income might be an obstacle to applying for a bursary.

In line with ESFA guidelines WBTC is 'free to determine the assessment criteria for eligibility for discretionary bursaries and the frequency of payments for all awards'.

However, in line with government guidance WBTC will attempt to assess 'real need' through a checklist approach for new learners in 2024-25 including those who re-enrol on the Study Programme. The checklist will help determine real need for a discretionary bursary and evidence that need. It will also help assess the amount of discretionary bursary appropriate. In order to ensure that ESFA discretionary bursary funds are directed appropriately we will need to ask for evidence of household income or benefits.

5. WBTC charitable funds

It is expected that the ESFA Bursary will be insufficient to meet the needs of all learners and WBTC is committed to 'topping up' provision through its own charitable reserves. WBTC is mindful that learners are a protected group by virtue of age and will support learners on ESFA funded/commissioned programmes who are ineligible for a Bursary or where the Bursary fund has been expired. The balance between allocation of discretionary Bursary funds and WBTC 'top up' is given in the table below.

Annual Gross Income in your household	income less than £16,191 or In receipt of income-related state benefits defined below: Universal Credit Income Support / Employment Support Allowance Housing Benefit Job Seekers Allowance Working Tax Credit / Child Tax Credit Personal Independence Payment	Income £16,191 to £25,500	Income £25,501 to £30,000	Income £30,001 to £35,000	Income over £35,000
Maximum Bursary Awarded	Assessed on individual need	£15	£10	£5	Nil
WBTC top up	Nil	£5	£10	£15	£20

6. Equality

Guidance does require WBTC to have a clear policy on how we apply assessment against real need. However the Bursary does not appear as a means tested benefit in the guidance nor is there any guidance on how finances or circumstances would be used to set a threshold to refuse in total or in part the payment of a Bursary. Therefore to comply with equality legislation, maximise opportunity for all learners and provide the fairest use of public money WBTC has implemented this policy.

7. Payments to Study Programme learners

The maximum monthly Bursary that will be paid is £20 per month for attendance on these programmes. £20 as a maximum is paid to learners on a full time equivalent programme only. Thereafter maximum payments will be made according to planned timetabled hours as shown in the table below, so part time learners will receive less.

If a learner's planned programme changes during the year, the maximum monthly Bursary will be adjusted accordingly.

It will be paid into the learner's bank account where ever possible and only then on the submission of either a signed timesheet or evidence via the attendance register. Learners are paid according to planned attendance percentage and will not be made if a learner falls below 90%. Additional payments may be made to learners who attend additional activity such as extra sessions or work placements where the £20 monthly allowance is considered insufficient to sustain their engagement. This will be assessed on an individual basis.

8. Accessing WBTC Bursary

These payments are there to motivate full attendance and to reflect the extra costs involved to a learner with additional study hours.

The only authorised absence that will be paid will be bank holidays in term time. This is usually restricted to May Bank Holidays or other one-off national holiday dates. In these circumstances the learner's attendance is assessed for those days that they are able to attend. Therefore if they have scheduled lessons on a holiday Monday they are assumed as having attended.

9. Travel, resources and PPE

The ESFA bursary is intended to cover the costs of travel, uniform and equipment required for the learners programme. Receipts of any purchases are required. Proof of travel such as bus tickets or train tickets is required. In some cases of hardship such as rural isolation or safeguarding taxi fares will be considered.

10. Payments in kind

Learners assessed as needing clothing for job interviews, PPE or general well-being will be allotted a budget maximum of £100. Only items that a learner does not possess will be purchased by WBTC for them and it will not be deducted from their monthly Bursary payment. To do so could be discriminatory to the neediest and impact on attendance. Other in-kind payments are considered on a case-by-case basis depending on personal need and can include but not be restricted to food and emergency payments in case of crisis.

11. Absence, sickness

The Bursary allocation is insufficient to pay for absence of any kind and **WBTC does not pay Bursary** in the case of sickness, learner holiday or other forms of absence. Only attendance in learning, work experience or other programme related activity is covered by the Bursary. In some exceptional circumstances for example bereavement of a close relative, attendance at a funeral of a close relative or sickness incurred during a training session absence will be covered by a Bursary payment. This is judged on a case by case basis. WBTC may occasionally be forced to close or suspend learning e.g. for acute staff shortage and learners will be paid their allowance to avoid disadvantaging them.

12. Applying for a Bursary of WBTC funded allowance

On enrolment on a 16-24 programme at WBTC, learners will be asked to complete a combined application form for Bursary and Free Meals. Where the learner is ineligible for ESFA discretionary bursary funds then the application will be treated as an application for a WBTC funded allowance.

Learners will be provided with the application form and the learner guide and encouraged to discuss the application with parents/guardians who will, in most cases, need to supply the evidence. Learners will be informed that until the signed application and evidence are received no payments can be made.

All learners will be asked to complete the form in order to confirm that the offer of support has been made. There is the facility to declare that they do not wish to apply for any financial support.

The learners will be assured of a payment of some kind regardless of their background and it will be paid in accordance with their planned hours. This will enable WBTC to support and motivate participation and attendance of learners regardless of their household income.

13. Appeals

Any learner who feels that they have been unfairly treated should first raise this with the manager of their learning programme. They can appeal a decision i.e. if a bursary or allowance is refused. The final decision on such appeals rests with the Executive Director.

14. Further Education Free Meals

From September 2014, the requirement for maintained school and academy sixth forms to provide free meals to disadvantaged students was extended to all FE funded institutions.

WBTC will apply the Education Skills Funding Agency guidance (July 2024) in meeting this requirement for the 2024-25 academic year.

Learner eligibility

Learners must be aged between 16 and 18 on 31 August 2024 to be eligible for a free meal in the 2024 to 2025 academic year. Learners who turn 19 during their study programme will remain eligible for a free meal until the end of the academic year in which they turn 19 or to the end of their study programme, whichever is sooner.

Learners aged between 19 and 25 who are subject to a Learning Difficulty Assessment (LDA) or Education Health and Care Plan (EHC Plan) and ESF Learners aged between 16 and 18 on 31 August 2024 are also entitled to a free meal while attending their provision if they meet the eligibility criteria.

Free meals are targeted at disadvantaged learners. For the purposes of eligibility for free meals, 'disadvantage' is defined by the learners being in receipt of, or having parents who are in receipt of, one or more of the following benefits:

- Universal Credit
- Income Support
- Income-based Jobseekers Allowance
- Income-related Employment and Support Allowance (ESA)
- Support under part VI of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999
- The guarantee element of State Pension Credit
- Child Tax Credit (provided they are not entitled to Working Tax Credit) and have an annual gross income of no more than £16,190, as assessed by His Majesty's Revenue and Customs
- Working Tax Credit run-on - paid for 4 weeks after you stop qualifying for Working Tax Credit

Verification of learner eligibility

The learner, or their parent/guardian, must submit an application to the institution where they are enrolled.

As part of the application, institutions must ask the learner (or their parent/guardian) to provide evidence of the award of the qualifying benefits set out above, for example an award notice or letter from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) or HMRC.

Application process

WBTC will use a combined application form for the Further Education Free Meals and the Bursary as many of the same qualifying elements apply.

Learners must apply for both elements if they wish to receive both.

It must be noted that the WBTC allowance element of the Bursary does not apply to the free meals application. A free meals allowance will only be paid to qualifying learners as prescribed by government guidance and there will be no WBTC 'top up'.

If a learner cannot provide evidence of eligibility for free meals, but there is concern that lack of food is having an effect on their learning or wellbeing, consideration of support will be made through WBTC discretionary 'in kind' payments on a case by case basis.

Payments process

As WBTC is not in a position to provide actual meals to qualifying learners due to the lack of catering facilities and the fact that many learners are in work based provision, we will pay the designated sum of £2.53 per day of attendance directly into the student bank account. For the purpose of the free meals allowance, a 'day' is any day on which the learner attends a full timetabled session or work placement. The allowance is not paid if the learner attends for a non-timetabled meeting or review unless they also attend a learning session that day. The amount will only be paid when attendance has been evidenced through submission of a timesheet or by the attendance register.

Learner information

WBTC has produced a simple guide to its Bursary and Free Meals system for applicants to use. It explains what a Bursary is, the purpose of the Bursary and how it is applied to learners. It also explains the Free Meals requirements.