



The Future of the Independent Living Fund

National Union of Students response – 9 October 2012



national union of students

Introduction

The National Union of Students (NUS) is a confederation of around 600 students' unions across the UK, and through them we represent the interests of around 7 million students in further and higher education, including disabled students who are additionally represented through NUS' Disabled Students Campaign, including those who use the ILF. It is important to consider the impact of the closure of the Independent Living Fund on disabled students, in addition to the wider population of severely disabled people who receive this benefit.

We are grateful to the Department of Work and Pensions for the opportunity to comment on the future of the Independent Living Fund.

Response

Question 1

Do you agree with the Government's proposal that the care and support needs of current ILF users should be met within the mainstream care and support system, with funding to local government in England and the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales? This would mean the closure of the ILF in 2015.

We do not support the closure of the Independent Living Fund, which has been crucial to supporting severely disabled people's right to live independently. We support a policy of direct payments as a means to empower disabled people to make choices about their own care, and believe the ILF has been a very successful way of achieving this, as evidenced by the numbers of people who have taken up the ILF.

Although we support the notion that adequate support for all disabled people should be provided within the mainstream care and support system, we are concerned that the current proposals will not ensure that support is adequate. Local government budgets are under severe strain, and we believe there will be a reduction in the amount of funding available for people receiving ILF if provision is moved to their local authority. This could result in restricting disabled people's access to higher education as their ability to live independently would be threatened.

We would urge the DWP not to close the ILF and transfer funds to local governments, as this would threaten both people's access to the funds and the amount of funds available.

Question 2

What are the key challenges that ILF users would face in moving from joint ILF/Local Authority to sole Local Authority funding of their care and support needs? How can any impacts be mitigated?

NUS is very concerned about the removal of this nationally-administered fund. NUS' *Life, Not Numbers* (2010) research into the experiences of disabled students in higher education found that support and funding delivered through local authorities can be problematic.¹ This is because many students move to a new area to begin higher education, or move back and forth between two or more

¹ NUS (2010) *Life, not Numbers: A report into the experiences of disabled students in higher education using personal care packages*. www.nus.org.uk/research.

local authorities over the course of their degree (during summer and winter holidays, for instance).

The research found that students having to renegotiate their care packages often faced hostility and reluctance from their new local authorities. Having to renegotiate the support they receive at the very time when they are also trying to negotiate the challenges of starting at university is time consuming and undermining. We are concerned that the closure of the ILF will exacerbate this problem by removing a source of funding that eligible disabled students were confident they could access regardless of where they attended university.

We would urge the DWP to not to close the ILF until after it has planned more widely around how to ensure better portability within the mainstream care and support system.

Question 3

What impact would the closure of the ILF have on Local Authorities and the provision of care and support services more widely? How could any impacts be mitigated?

We believe local authorities' budgets are likely to be more strained than ever if they are expected to take on the provision of full support to current ILF users. This will of course include some ILF users who do not currently use the services of their local authority, which will also increase the administrative burden on local governments.

As local governments will struggle to afford the additional support that some disabled people require in order to live independently and in the community, we are concerned that more individuals may be required to live in residential care facilities, which could also restrict disabled people's access to university.

Question 4

What are the specific challenges in relation to Group 1 users? How can the Government ensure that this group are able to access the full range of Local Authority care and support services for which they are eligible?

Since engaging with local authority care and support services is not part of the ILF eligibility criteria for Group 1 users, the challenge will be around identifying these individuals and supporting them to engage with local authority services. It

is important to consider that individuals may have many reasons for not taking up local authority services, including the fact that they may be students (most likely, for Group 1 users, mature students) who move frequently between local authorities and therefore have not found it beneficial to attempt to navigate these systems. The DWP will need to help Group 1 users navigate the system of local authority support through the provision of clear guidance and specialised support.

Question 5

How can the DWP, the ILF, and Local Authorities best continue to work with ILF users between now and 2015? How can the ILF best work with individual Local Authorities if the decision to close the ILF is taken?

Once again, we stress that we disagree with the closure of the ILF, for the reasons outline above. However, if the decision to close the ILF is taken, we urge the DWP and local authorities not to forget about the specific circumstances of ILF users who are students. This means developing better systems of portability and having a plan in place for individuals, like students, who move between local authorities several times.

Contacts

NUS would be happy to discuss any aspect of this consultation further. In the first instance, please contact:

Lucy Buchanan-Parker

Research and Policy Officer (Liberation)

07585 969859

Lucy.buchanan-parker@nus.org.uk