



## DSA procurement reforms – Supplier Day Questions and Answers

March 2022

Please see below responses to questions submitted via the Delta eSourcing portal. 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.

If the topic of your question does not appear, there are two reasons why we are unable to answer your question:

1. At the moment, we can only answer questions relating to what was presented at the supplier day. We cannot answer questions relating to the detail that will follow in subsequent stages of the procurement, therefore, any questions relating to key performance indicators (KPIs) or contractual details will be available within the information at the next stage.

2. We are not able to answer questions on behalf of the Welsh Government or UK Government's Department for Education. We are not able to answer questions that relate to policy.

### Procurement

#### **Q: What is being procured?**

**A:** Suppliers are being sought to provide study needs assessments, assistive technology, assistive technology training and the associated support services for students in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) from Student Finance England (SFE) and Student Finance Wales (SFW).

Assistive technology supply to include computers and software in addition to a range of other equipment such as ergonomic furniture, computer peripherals (printers and scanners), voice recorders, and other more specialist items such as braille readers.

Non-Medical Help (NMH) and travel and are not included in the scope of this procurement.

#### **Q: Why are contracts being put in place now?**

**A:** The reforms follow a government decision to put contracts in place for DSA providers.

We also know that the current DSA process is long and complex and a new supplier model will help to address significant pain points in the current customer journey.

#### **Q: How have you determined the pain points?**

**A:** SLC has undertaken customer research ahead of the DSA reforms, including surveying over 4,500 customers and undertaking a number of in depth one to one interviews to understand the customer journey and validate the pain points identified.

We have also established a DSA Customer Panel to hear more about the experiences of customers in receipt of DSA and help to shape the reforms.

**Q: Will this research be published?**

A: No, SLC do not intend to publish further analysis of the research. Due to the confidential and personal nature of discussions with the customer panel and one to one interviewees, including sharing personal experiences, we are not able to share this information.

**Q: Why was a previous procurement exercise abandoned?**

A: SLC, in conjunction with the UK Government's Department for Education and Welsh Government's Higher Education Division, took the decision to abandon the previous procurement in recognition of the fact that we had the opportunity to use the procurement to also increase process efficiency, value for money and enhance the customer experience.

**Q: Do SLC consider that there are no longer any conflict-of-interest concerns given that collaboration is encouraged?**

A: The potential for conflicts of interest between suppliers should reduce through formal contractual arrangements.

To minimise the potential for conflicts of interests, SLC will have contractual clauses covering anti-competitive behaviours and robust KPIs in place with new suppliers. SLC will also continue to review and approve all needs assessment recommendations.

**Q: The integration of assessment, equipment supply and training should improve the student journey. However, whilst assessors do have an eye on the public purse, their main allegiance is to disabled students and, perhaps, to the organisation within which they operate, which could lead to generous or over-prescribing. That in turn could lead to calls for cost-cutting, standard packages etc. What measures will be taken to discourage overprescribing whilst continuing to ensure appropriate, personalised solutions?**

A: SLC will continue to review and approve all needs assessment recommendations to ensure that they align with DSA policy and are appropriate to meet the needs of the student.

To minimise the potential for conflicts of interests, SLC will have contractual clauses covering anti-competitive behaviours and robust KPIs in place with new suppliers.

**Q: The new service model was referenced as a "potential" new service model several times throughout the presentation (slide 3: "potential new delivery model", slide 4: "potential, completely new service model", slide 6: "potential future DSA procurement exercise"). What does SLC mean with the use of the word "potential"?**

A: The use of the word "potential" recognised that the formal procurement process has not started until the call for competition has been issued.

**Q: In relation to SLC being referred to as the buyer, are we correct in assuming that when referring to SLC, this covers our relationship and contact with SFW and SFE?**

**A:** Yes, SLC is the contracting body on behalf of Student Finance England and Student Finance Wales customers.

**Q: The rationale for change is to enhance the customer experience and address pain points. Are there any pro-points about the current system that you want to retain? What is it that you most value about the student experience that you want to retain?**

**A:** We will seek to retain and strengthen the quality-of-service aspects that students receive just now. We also aim to increase the number of students receiving their DSA support.

**Q: Recent behaviour in the sector among some larger companies indicates that there may have been foreknowledge of the reform resulting in one contract and a regional divide. Is there any possibility that competition rules have been broken and is this something that you are prepared to look into?**

**A:** If anyone has evidence of competition rules being broken in relation to the procurement, they should provide evidence to SLC for investigation and / or the Competition and Markets Authority via: [Report a competition or market problem - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/report-a-competition-or-market-problem).

### **Procurement model**

**Q: What is the new procurement model?**

**A:** Under the new procurement model, the supply of needs assessments, assistive technology and assistive technology training, and also ongoing assistive technology support, will be provisioned under a single supplier, rather than separate suppliers as per the current arrangement.

The new service model applies to SFE and SFW funded customers. The procurement of suppliers to serve the model will be offered under four lots by dividing SFE and SFW into four geographic areas of roughly equal size in terms of the number of DSA customers from previous years.

**Q: Can the DSA please explain their rationale for regionalizing the Lots? Why can suppliers that operate nationally (UK wide) only apply for two regions? How does the DSA expect suppliers to choose those regions when they have the capacity and value proposition to operate in all of them?**

**A:** Suppliers are not limited to apply for two regions. Suppliers can choose to bid on all lots, however, a maximum of two will be awarded to any one supplier.

In order to deliver against the rationale for change, under the new delivery model, the supply of study needs assessments, assistive technology and assistive technology training, and the ongoing assistive technology support, will be provisioned by single, regional suppliers. There will be up to four suppliers to deliver the model across four regional lots.

The products and services will be consistent in each regional lot and suppliers can structure the services in a way they feel is optimum to meet the requirements of the contract.

The four regional supplier model mitigates against the potential risk of supplier failure under a one national supplier model.

**Q: Are bids from a single organisation with national coverage allowed if these bids are splits into the relevant geographical lots?**

**A:** Yes, suppliers can structure the services in a way they feel is optimum to meet the requirements of the contract. Suppliers can choose to bid on all lots, however, a maximum of two will be awarded to any one supplier.

**Q: Will a small business have the opportunity to lead a bid rather than have the profits taken by a large outsourcer?**

**A:** Suppliers can structure the services in a way they feel is optimum to meet the requirements of the contract.

**Q: What is SLC going to do, as part of this new procurement model, to protect SMEs?**

**A:** The structure of procurement model is designed to appeal to the widest range of bidders. SLC welcomes and encourages suppliers - both legacy and new entrants to the DSA market – in line with the government’s support for SMEs.

We encourage interested parties to form relationships to allow innovative approaches to be proposed and full geographical coverage to be achieved.

**Q: Can you be a lead bid and a subcontractor on another bid?**

**A:** Suppliers can bid for as many lots as they wish whether as the prime / lead and / or subcontractor.

**Q: Can an organisation appear in multiple Tender submissions, in varied formations and models? i.e. as Primary and/or Sub-Contractor status?**

**A:** Suppliers can bid for as many lots as they wish whether as the prime / lead and / or subcontractor.

The process will involve multi-lot providers being able to state preferred lots.

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Any one supplier can only be involved in a maximum of two lots, whether that involvement is as prime / lead, subcontractor or as a Joint Venture, Consortium or Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) member.

This restriction shall also apply such that if a supplier is part of a group, the maximum of two lots shall apply across any and all group entities (including parent entities).

This restriction shall also apply to related suppliers such that if a supplier has an ownership interest of 10% or more in another supplier or proposed supplier, the maximum of two lots shall apply across such related companies.

If, in the process of award, a supplier is part of a successful bid for two lots awarded, no further bids that the supplier is part of will be considered.

Full details of the lot limiting process will be set out in the procurement documentation

In the award process and related suppliers will not be awarded more than two Lots.

**Q: Will the authority please confirm if they would prefer to have one supplier for each of the 4 lots, for resilience, flexibility and stability purposes; or is it preferred to have 2 suppliers to cover 2 lots each, for simplicity and efficiency purposes?**

**A:** SLC has no preference. The contracts will be awarded to the suppliers that best demonstrate they are able to meet the requirements of the contract.

**Q: Is there a preferred prime + subcontractor model (i.e. ATSP as the prime or assessment provider as the prime?)**

**A:** SLC has no preference. The contracts will be awarded to the suppliers that best demonstrate they are able to meet the requirements of the contract.

**Q: For lots with multiple providers (if applicable) will the interim e-quote system be utilised to establish the most cost-effective provider in that region?**

**A:** Under the new delivery model, the supply of study needs assessments, assistive technology and assistive technology training, and the ongoing assistive technology support, will be provisioned by single, regional suppliers. Each lot will have one provider and not multiple providers.

**Q: Please can you confirm that suppliers must bid for all services in a zonal lot and that there is no opportunity to bid for sub-lots in different regions. For example, it is not possible to bid for assistive technology in Zone 1 and assistive technology training in Zone 2.**

**A:** The supply of study needs assessments, assistive technology and assistive technology training, and the ongoing assistive technology support, will be provisioned by single, regional suppliers. It is not possible to bid for sub-lots.

Interested parties were offered the opportunity to share their contact details with other organisations to collaborate on bids. These details were sent to all respondents registered on the Delta eSourcing portal.

**Q: Can the 'register of suppliers' be continued to be added to after the 2nd March? Can SLC provide an extension on this date? If so can SLC identify the extension date asap.**

**A:** If you would like to add your details to this register, please send them via the Delta eSourcing portal and we will recirculate the list.

**Q: What is the rationale of limiting the bids to two per region? What are you expecting to get out of this? Is this not likely to lead to disparity in provision and quality and cost differences across the regions?**

**A:** Suppliers are not limited to apply for two regions. Suppliers can choose to bid on all lots, however, a maximum of two will be awarded to any one supplier.

The structure of procurement model is designed to appeal to the widest range of bidders. SLC welcomes and encourages suppliers - both legacy and new entrants to the DSA market – in line with the government's support for SMEs.

We encourage interested parties to form relationships to allow innovative approaches to be proposed and full geographical coverage to be achieved.

Suppliers will also work with SLC, DfE and Welsh Government to enhance and strengthen the existing quality standards.

**Q: For submissions as a consortium, is SLC looking for a particular level of corporate structure?**

**A:** Suppliers can structure the services in a way they feel is optimum to meet the requirements of the contract.

**Q: "Consortiums" were mentioned. Please define. For example, does this mean that SLC would issue contracts to several suppliers individually in a region, or is the programme design limited to a single contract of supply in each region?**

**A:** Under the new delivery model, the supply of study needs assessments, assistive technology and assistive technology training, and the ongoing assistive technology support, will be provisioned by single, regional suppliers. Each lot will have one provider and not multiple providers.

**Q: All things being equal, will collaborations (joint bids/ consortiums) be looked upon more favourably than a sole application?**

**A:** SLC has no preference. The contracts will be awarded to the suppliers that best demonstrate they are able to meet the requirements of the contract.

**Q: What steps will you take to ensure that large companies, which do not need to join with smaller companies in order to tender, will not end up occupying all four regions and taking full market share, therefore squeezing out all smaller companies who currently provide excellent services.**

**A:** The contracts will be awarded to the suppliers that best demonstrate they are able to meet the requirements of the contract.

**Q: Currently, students supported by smaller assessment centres and AT trainers enjoy a highly personal and individual service. Relationships are built and sustained over a long period of time with assessors who know the student and their needs. How will you preserve this quality of service given that at present students being seen by larger companies receive a far more impersonal service? One example of this is that students who are assessed by smaller companies will typically have any review of needs or amendments of support with their original assessor. With the larger companies they will usually be reviewed by a new assessor who is unknown to the student and vice versa.**

**A:** Suppliers will work with SLC, DfE and Welsh Government to enhance and strengthen the existing quality standards. Working together, they will create a quality framework that ensures customer experience is at the heart of the reforms. This will include agreed service levels, quality standards and processes for resolving exception cases.

**Q: What are the regional boundaries?**

**A:**

Zone	Territory	Customer volume (20-21 Academic Year)	% share of students
1	Scotland North West England North East England Yorkshire and the Humber	171 6,940 2,265 4,990 <b>Total = 14,366</b>	<b>24.9%</b>
2	West Midlands East Midlands Wales Northern Ireland	5,512 4,255 3,988 9 <b>Total = 13,183</b>	<b>22.9%</b>



3	East England London	5,245 10,353 <b>Total = 15,598</b>	<b>27.1%</b>
4	South West England South East England	5, 285 9,114 <b>Total = 14,399</b>	<b>25%</b>

**Q: Lots are typically split by services or products. For the avoidance of doubt, can SLC confirm that the Lots are geographic in nature and are in line with the four zones represented in the slides that were presented on the supplier day?**

**A:** Yes, the lots represent the regional split.

**Q: How were the regional boundaries determined?**

**A:** The regions are based on the volume of DSA applications received in previous years split as equally as possible to create four regional lots.

**Q: Why is Wales not a lot on its own?**

**A:** Neighbouring regions have been grouped with Wales on a volume basis to make the size of the lots across the UK as equal as possible. This will help to ensure the amount of business awarded for each lot is as fair or equal as possible. SFW supports an average of four to five thousand DSA customers per year so, at this scale, to be attractive to the widest range of suppliers Wales is included as part of a larger geographical lot.

**Q: Given that Wales is a country with its own devolved education system, can you explain why the procurement has reduced its status to that of a 'region'?**

**A:** The procurement is split into four geographical areas and Wales is included in one of those geographical areas, for the purposes of the procurement only.

**Q: What provision will be made for the Welsh language?**

**A:** Suppliers bidding for Lot 2 must comply with the Welsh Language Standards applicable for this contract. The supplier



will be expected to report against the Welsh Language Standards applicable for this contract on an annual basis.

**Q: Is there a Welsh language requirement for all lots or is it only for Lot 2?**

**A:** Only Lot 2 has a Welsh language requirement.

**Q: Do you foresee any circumstances where the regional boundaries will change?**

**A:** We anticipate that the regional boundaries will remain in place for the term of the contract.

### Customer journey

**Q: Is it expected that funding bodies will continue to manage the DSA application process, student eligibility for DSA and student approval of DSA2?**

**A:** Yes, these reforms do not impact on the current application process for students.

**Q: Can SLC provide clarification on the requirement to complete needs assessments if the student lives in region 1 but studies in region 4. Where will the needs assessment take place?**

**A:** Customers will be assigned to a geographical zone based on their address at the point of application for DSA, this is to ensure that there is minimal impact on any student who would prefer to have a face-to-face needs assessment.

Suppliers will provide face-to-face or remote needs assessments, at the customer's choice, for customers domiciled in the zone or zones that they are responsible for. If a customer relocates to a different address within a different zone but still requires their face-to-face needs assessment to be carried out, the customer can choose to be reallocated to the partner supplier in that zone. We anticipate the number of reallocations to be low.

Suppliers may need to deliver assistive technology, assistive technology training and assistive technology support in a different zone to cater for the scenario where students apply for DSA at their home address where their needs are assessed but attend or live in a different zone.

**Q: SLC mentioned an elapsed time of more than 100 days between application and receipt of equipment. Can SLC provide a more detailed breakdown of the number of days between each stage for the current model?**

**A:** The longest segment of the customer journey is currently from the point SLC issues the customer's eligibility letter, to the point we receive the needs assessment report (NAR) back. This can take, on average, 50 days. We believe the proposed delivery model, which will remove the onus on the customer to drive the process, enabled through data sharing with regional partners and supported by robust KPIs, provides the means to reduce the elapsed time of this part of the process.

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**Q: As SLC will be working in partnership with regional suppliers, do you have the average number of days for the submission of medical evidence to the agreement of it and the issuing of the DSA1?**

**A:** In the new delivery model, SLC will securely share details of customers who have been deemed eligible for DSAs, to enable the regional partners to proactively engage with customers to book their needs assessment. SLC will continue to operate within KPIs to review disability evidence submitted by customers in a timely manner.

**Q: From the percentage split that has been provided across regions, is this the assumed amount of successful candidates following assessment or is this the forecasted volumes of required assessments? If so, what is the assumed percentage that equipment would need to be procured for?**

**A:** The 57,500 customers within the regional split (slide 16) is the amount of customers who were deemed eligible for DSA in the academic year 2020 - 2021. Over 40,000 of these customers went on to book needs assessments. There will inevitably be an element of customers choosing not to continue with the process for a number of reasons. However, we anticipate that the new model, where regional partners will proactively work to book needs assessments on behalf of customers could lead to an increase in needs assessment take up.

The vast majority of customers who have their needs assessed are deemed to require assistive technology.

**Q: It is estimated that the student journey time would be reduced by 25 days, where in the new process is the saving estimated to be?**

**A:** The savings will be achieved through robust KPIs for each part of the process and active supplier engagement with the student to proactively assist them through the process.

**Q: Will some report recommendations be pre-approved versus a sign off at SLC for every report? This would help to reduce the student journey length.**

**A:** SLC will continue to review and approve Needs Assessment recommendations.

**Q: Is the intention that the contracted providers take on the majority of the responsibility for moving through the workflow for the customer? So, once approvals are made, they are proactive to contact the customer or is the intention more to reduce touchpoints and the student still decides when they want to move forward?**

**A:** Yes, the customer will be contacted by the supplier proactively to engage them in the next stage of the DSA process.

**Q: Will the new suppliers be expected to provide ergonomic assessments & equipment?**

**A:** Yes, the new contracts include ergonomic assessments and assistive technology supply to include computers and software in addition to a range of other equipment such as ergonomic furniture.

**Q: Please can you provide us with the number of Assistive Technology training sessions that your £3m expenditure represents?**

**A:** Data on the number of assistive technology training sessions is not available. Currently our systems do not report on this.

**Q: Could you provide a view on the most common disabilities that DSA is awarded against to support students?**

**A: Please see most recent figures below for academic year 2021 - 2022:**

<b>Specific learning difficulty</b>	<b>33.6%</b>
<b>Mental Health</b>	<b>24.8%</b>
<b>Multiple disabilities</b>	<b>20.7%</b>
<b>Longstanding Illness</b>	<b>11.6%</b>
<b>Autism</b>	<b>5.4%</b>
<b>Deaf/Hearing Impaired</b>	<b>1.7%</b>
<b>Wheelchair/mobility</b>	<b>1.2%</b>
<b>Blind/Visually Impaired</b>	<b>1.0%</b>

**Q: What impact is there for students while they transition to the new suppliers?**

**A:** The procurement is currently in the early stages and, if there is a change in supplier, we do not anticipate that contracts will be awarded until later this year. When contracts are awarded, there will be a phased roll out across the regions to ensure a gradual move to the new supplier model. While current students will ultimately be transitioned to the new arrangements, we expect the impact to be minimal.

We would expect any company who has been paid in advance for warranty and insurance to continue to support our customers for the duration of the pre-paid period (usually the students' expected course length). Where companies do not honour this agreement, SLC, in conjunction with DfE and or WG, will take action to recover any funds in relation to the support paid. This money has been paid for the students' DSA grant entitlement and, as public money, must be used for the purpose paid.

**Q: What about equity for students who are on current system and students on new system? New students will be at an advantage.**

**A:** Current students will ultimately be transitioned to the new arrangements through a phased roll out across the regions.

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**Q: In the event of a Centre not making the shortlist of eight in a region is that the end of the line for the Centre and can we assume that SFE will no longer wish to engage with it within the DSA process beyond September 2022?**

**A:** The procurement is currently in the early stages and, if there is a change in supplier, we do not anticipate that contracts will be awarded until later this year. When contracts are awarded, there will be a phased roll out across the regions to ensure a gradual move to the new supplier model. Throughout transition to the new service model, we expect continuity of service from our current suppliers where they have been paid for goods and services and support for the length of students' courses. Should a supplier decide to exit the market, we would work closely with any impacted students to provide reassurance and ensure they have continuity of support.

**Q: Slide 4 references "wider improvements to the assessment process". What does SLC anticipate these improvements to be when are they likely to be implemented?**

**A:** This refers to the improvements detailed on slide 21. The DSA assessment improvements work will make it possible and easier for more DSA customers to apply online.

**Q: Slide 21 references a "project underway at SLC to reform the application process for customers in receipt of DSA" and "DSA assessment improvements work". What does SLC anticipate these improvements to be and when are they likely to be implemented?**

**A:** SLC is currently working on reforms to significantly improve the application experience for students in receipt of DSA. These improvements will enable all DSA students to apply via a fully online, accessible application service, with access to digital assistance and support at every stage of their student finance journey. SLC expect these changes will benefit students from later this year.

### **Timescales and next stage**

**Q: What are the next stages in the procurement process? What are the timescales?**

**A:** This is a two-stage process with the call for competition opening the first stage. The call for competition is expected to open on 1 April.

At that stage, interested bidders will respond to our needs by completing a selection questionnaire. The selection questionnaire is a standard template defined by Crown Commercial and requires the supplier to outline their suitability to engage in Government contracts.

The questionnaire will be supplemented with some questions regarding suppliers' relevant skills and experience and the lots they are intending to bid for. These will be evaluated to determine a shortlist of the most suitable suppliers.

Up to eight bidders who are, between them, providing coverage for all the lots will be taken through to the second stage, the Invitation to Tender (ITT).

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The ITT will require a written response that will constitute quality questions, social value questions and also a commercial price response. The bidders will also be asked to undertake a presentation to SLC to help clarify their bid.

More information on the timeline will be available when the contract notice has been issued.

**Q: What are the timings for the new model being in place?**

**A:** We anticipate contracts being in place later this year once the procurement process is complete and suppliers have been appointed.

**Q: Who is writing the questions for the PQQ, what understanding do they have of the DSA industry and who will be adjudicating the responses?**

**A:** At that stage, interested bidders will respond to our needs by completing a selection questionnaire. The selection questionnaire is a standard template set by Crown Commercial Service and requires the supplier to outline their suitability to engage in government contracts.

The questionnaire will include some additional questions regarding suppliers' relevant skills and experience and the lots they are intending to bid for.

The responses will be considered by an evaluation panel that incorporates a range of experience.

**Q: Can SLC confirm if TUPE is expected to apply?**

**A:** SLC does not consider TUPE to apply, primarily because the current delivery model does not involve a contractual relationship between SLC and the supplier.

**Q: Will bidders be able to promote the scheme to potential applicants in the regions they are appointed to?**

**A:** To ensure that there is no conflict of interest, DSA third party suppliers should not advertise the DSA service. However, SLC would be happy to work with suppliers to understand any gaps in awareness of the DSA product.

**Q: We are a AT training provider but do not supply equipment so will not be going to tender. Is there any more information about when the new contract will take effect? Further will there be opportunities to still provide the service we do and if so how via the organization that are awarded the contract? Any more information on how this will work and time scales would be very helpful.**

**A:** More information on the procurement process will be available when the contract notice has been issued. Interested parties were offered the opportunity to share their contact details with other organisations to collaborate on bids. These details were sent to all respondents registered on the Delta eSourcing portal.

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If you would like to add your details to this register, please send them via the Delta eSourcing portal and we will recirculate the list.

**Q: What do these reforms mean for the sector?**

**A:** SLC inherited the administration of DSA from local authorities more than 10 years ago and in that time there have been no contracts put in place between SLC and any of the suppliers. While we recognise that the move to a new supplier model is a significant reform, we are confident the reforms will deliver a better experience for customers in receipt of DSA.

Putting in place contractual arrangements between SLC and the suppliers should enable the service to be controlled, monitored and managed more effectively. Robust performance management at framework and contract levels will also provide assurance that value for money is being delivered.

We know that DSA is vital to enabling opportunity and widening participation in higher education and we want to increase process efficiency, assure value for money and enhance the customer experience.

**Q: What other options were considered as a procurement model?**

**A:** A wide range of potential models were considered, including contracting the 'as is' model. The regional supplier model, with up to four suppliers, addressed the need to increase process efficiency, assure value for money and enhance the customer experience.

Working with partners to deliver needs assessments, assistive technology and assistive technology training will address the customer pain points we have identified, including the onus being on customers to take action and having to contact multiple companies. The new supplier model will ensure customers have clarity about where they are in the process and mean that one supplier has ownership of their journey.

**Q: When will an Equality Impact Assessment be published?**

**A:** We expect the Equality Impact Assessment to be published following the opening of the call for competition.

**Quality**

**Q: How will you ensure quality when working with a small number of organisations?**

**A:** Working together with SLC, DfE and Welsh Government, suppliers will create a quality framework that ensures customer experience is at the heart of the reforms.

This will include agreed service levels, quality standards and processes for resolving exception cases.

The supplier will be expected to track the status and history of all customer contact through the end-to-end process and report to SLC. Each stage of the process will be measured against KPIs and the supplier will report their performance against the KPIs.

To ensure appropriate service governance, SLC will require all suppliers to partake in monthly performance reviews and biannual account reviews. This forum will determine how well key measures are being met and how the service is being received by customers and SLC.

The supplier will facilitate SLC's access to the real-time customer data to manage the service and to allow audits and investigations to be conducted where necessary.

We will also continue to engage with customers throughout the process, via the student survey and DSA customer panel, to ensure their feedback informs the quality framework.

**Q: How will you work with the sector to ensure quality through these reforms?**

**A:** We are engaging with our customers and non-commercial stakeholders, such as third sector bodies, in these discussions to ensure the quality framework best suits our customers.

We have established a customer panel for students in receipt of DSA to discuss reforms and improvements that can be made.

We also have an established forum with the Disabled Students Stakeholder Group (DSSG) with membership that represents the views of the DSA sector.

As well as working with suppliers to enhance and strengthen the existing quality standards, we are partnering with charities that advocate on behalf of disabled students to inform the quality framework.

**Q: Will the QAF apply for centre set up and assessment process or will there be a revised version? Who will audit this?**

**A:** The existing guidelines for assessment centres will be superseded by the introduction of contracts. More information on the procurement process will be available when the contract notice has been issued.

**Q: How will specialisms (low incidence, high level of support requirements) be catered for under the new procurement model?**

**A:** The new suppliers will be required to support needs assessments, equipment provision and training for the full range of disabilities, including low incidence / high support disabilities such as visual and hearing impairments.

Suppliers will also work with SLC, DfE and Welsh Government to enhance and strengthen the existing quality standards to ensure the best possible experience for customers.

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**Q: How will you maintain the expertise of smaller, specialist providers that support students in receipt of DSA under the new model?**

**A:** We are committed to a sustainable DSA marketplace. The framework has been created in a way that potential suppliers can structure the services in a way they feel is optimum to meet our needs, this includes ensuring they can meet the needs of those students who require more specialist support.

SLC welcomes and encourages suppliers - both legacy and new entrants to the DSA market – in line with the government’s support for SMEs.

We also encourage interested parties to form relationships to allow innovative approaches to be proposed and full geographical coverage to be achieved. To encourage collaboration, we are publishing a document on the Delta eSourcing portal to share the details of organisations who may want to partner with other suppliers.

**Q: Will set packages of support be considered as part of the tender?**

**A:** SLC, along with DfE and Welsh Government, are considering a change that may be introduced to the DSA service in the future, however this has not been confirmed.

Should this change be implemented in the future, the change would offer certain sub-groups of DSA customers the choice between attending a needs assessment or selecting a set package of support associated with their condition.

The rationale for considering this change is to address feedback that some students find the needs assessment a barrier to accessing support and already have a clear idea of what support they will need.

The choice to select a set package of support or to attend a needs assessment would be entirely at the discretion of the customer, and students would always retain the right to have a full needs assessment at any point.

While this choice would be limited to customers with certain conditions and not available to all DSA customers, it may impact the demand for needs assessment appointments at a point in the future for that group.

Suppliers would be engaged from the early design phase about any potential changes.

**Q: Has consideration been given to the timing of this tender, given that suppliers are being asked to bid when assessment work might drastically reduce if some students are permitted to self-assess?**

**A:** SLC, along with DfE and Welsh Government, are considering a change that may be introduced to the DSA service in the future, however this has not been confirmed.

Suppliers would be engaged from the early design phase about any potential changes and an Equality Impact Assessment would be conducted. However, as confirmed in the presentation no decision has been made on this initiative and it is expected that if this change did proceed in the future it would only apply to customers with certain conditions.



**Q: Is allowing students with certain disabilities to self-assess, but not others, compliant with the Equality Act 2010?**

**A:** The rationale for considering this change is to address feedback that some students find the needs assessment a barrier to accessing support and already have a clear idea of what support they will need.

The choice to select a set package of support or to attend a needs assessment would be entirely at the discretion of the customer, and students would always retain the right to have a full needs assessment at any point.

Prior to any change being implemented, an equality impact assessment would be conducted.

**Q: Please supply proposed date or timeframe for the introduction of Self Assessments should they be approved.**

**A:** No decision has been made on the introduction of set packages of support.

**Q: Does SLC see the process of assessment changing - e.g. is there likely to be a change of NAR template again?**

**A:** No significant changes to the process of assessment are currently planned but that there may be administrative changes, such as updates to the NAR template, from time to time during the contract. SLC will engage promptly with suppliers regarding any changes.

**Q: Will funded Review of Needs still continue to be an accepted practice?**

**A:** Yes, review of needs will be funded where required.

**Q: Are you able to provide the numbers of funded reviews that were carried out during the periods identified on page 16 of the presentation?**

**A:** Data on the number of funded reviews is not available our current systems do not report on this.

**Q: Will students' DSA1 letters continue to be issued throughout the year, or will there be a specific processing window(s)?**

**A:** There is no change to when customers need to submit their applications and evidence, so we anticipate customers will continue to apply for DSA throughout the year and eligibility notifications will be issued on an ongoing basis.

We are, of course, continuing to work to promote early applications in order to increase the number of customers who have support in place prior to the start of their course. In the new delivery model model, SLC intends to share the details of eligible customers with regional partners and this will eliminate the need for customers to take action on the back of receiving a DSA1 letter.

**Q: Can it be confirmed whether the method by which the assessment takes place is purely down to the students' choice, and no prior authorisation would be required for a remote assessment.**

**A:** Suppliers will provide face-to-face or remote needs assessments, at the customer's choice, for customers domiciled in the zone or zones that they are responsible for.

**Q: Why has non-medical help (NMH) and travel not been included in the tender?**

**A:** As confirmed at the supplier day, SLC was commissioned to put contracts in place for the supply of study needs assessments, assistive technology and assistive technology training. NMH and travel are therefore not within scope of the procurement reforms.

**Q: How will the changes impact on the delivery of non-medical help (NMH)?**

**A:** Needs assessors will continue to provide two quotes for NMH provision, as they do under the current system.

**Q: Is there a list of approved NMH providers?**

**A:** Yes, DfE maintain a register of NMH providers who can support SFE students. SFW students can request NMH support from any suitable provider on condition they meet the role requirements and while there is no requirement for SFW students to select a NMH provider from this register, the register is often used to help identify suitable providers and so it is beneficial for NMH providers to be on the register. The register is published on SLC's website.

**Q: Changing NMH providers could be extremely disrupting to students. Will students be allowed to keep their existing / current NMH provider?**

**A:** The move to the new arrangements should not result in any students with existing NMH support needing to change NMH provider. NMH is not in scope of the procurement and the current processes will remain in place.

**Q: What will happen to students if suppliers exit the market quickly due to the procurement changes?**

**A:** Throughout transition to the new service model, we expect continuity of service from our current suppliers. Should a supplier decide to exit the market, we would work closely with any impacted students to provide reassurance and ensure they have continuity of support.

**Q: Has SLC considered and will be putting anything in place, in reference to supporting the students already supplied by existing ATSPs that are likely to not continue service if not successful in this tender?**

**A:** Throughout transition to the new service model, we expect continuity of service from our current suppliers. Should a supplier decide to exit the market, we would work closely with any impacted students to provide reassurance and ensure they have continuity of support.

We would expect any company who has been paid in advance for warranty and insurance to continue to support our customers for the duration of the pre-paid period, usually the students expected course length.

Where companies do not honour this agreement, SLC, in conjunction with DfE and or WG, will take action to recover any funds in relation to the support paid. This money has been paid for the students' DSA grant entitlement and, as public money, must be used for the purpose paid.

**Q: How will continuing students be supported?**

**A:** We would expect any company who has been paid in advance for warranty and insurance to continue to support our customers for the duration of the pre-paid period, usually the students expected course length.

Where companies do not honour this agreement, SLC, in conjunction with DfE and or WG, will take action to recover any funds in relation to the support paid. This money has been paid for the students' DSA grant entitlement and, as public money, must be used for the purpose paid.

**Q: What consultation/engagement has taken place ahead of the reforms?**

**A:** Students and student representative groups have been engaged throughout. With their feedback, a model has been designed that we are confident will improve the service for students and secure better value for public money.

In terms of customers, SLC has undertaken customer research ahead of the DSA reforms, including surveying over 4,500 customers and undertaking a number of in depth one to one interviews to understand the customer journey and validate the pain points identified. We have also established a DSA Customer Panel to hear more about the experiences of customers in receipt of DSA and help to shape the reforms.

In terms of current suppliers, it would not be appropriate for current suppliers to be consulted on the commercial details of a government procurement exercise. This is an administrative reform and does not affect DSA policy, students' eligibility or entitlement.

**Q: Can you please stop using the phrase 'pain points' as it is potentially triggering?**

**A:** Thank you for this feedback, we will take it into consideration for future communications.

**Q: Do you envisage any HEP involvement in the DSA process? Is there any intention of consulting HEPs about any changes?**

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**A:** Suppliers can structure the services in a way they feel is optimum to meet the requirements of the contract.

We have engaged with a range of non-commercial stakeholders throughout the process and will continue to do so.

In terms of current suppliers, it would not be appropriate for current suppliers to be consulted on the commercial details of a government procurement exercise. This is an administrative reform and does not affect DSA policy, students' eligibility or entitlement.

**Ends**