



Activity Agreements Opportunities for All

How the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) process has been streamlined to reduce barriers for young people on an Activity Agreement

Context

West Dunbartonshire Council has streamlined the EMA process for young people undertaking an Activity Agreement. Colleagues involved in the EMA process with school pupils highlighted that the process was complicated and time-consuming. With the introduction of Activity Agreements, West Dunbartonshire Council considered how these issues would impact upon young people undertaking an Activity Agreement. It was evident to them that many young people and their parents would find the existing process stressful and difficult due to barriers such as levels of literacy and numeracy, the often chaotic nature of family life, or where young people were living on their own. This may result in young people not taking up their entitlement to financial support and in some cases therefore not being able to undertake an Activity Agreement.

EMA guidelines allow for the use of local authority-specific application forms and processes. West Dunbartonshire Council has adapted both the application form and the process to reduce barriers for young people undertaking an Activity Agreement.

Key elements

The two key elements of West Dunbartonshire's streamlined approach to EMA are a redesigned application form and a strong partnership with Job Centre Plus.

West Dunbartonshire Council has produced a streamlined EMA application form which is more accessible. The type-face is larger and the use of language has been taken into account, alongside the layout of the document. Question choices relevant to Activity Agreements have been included in the form, helping the young person to understand how to complete it. From the outset, the new application form helps the process feel less daunting for young people and their parents.

Several changes have been made to the EMA process. The most notable of these are in relation to details of income. The West Dunbartonshire process has been streamlined so that if the family is in receipt of family tax credits they do not have

to complete the details of income section. In addition, if a young person or parent claim benefits but are unable to provide the relevant documents (P60U or Tax Credit Award Notice) an authorisation form has been devised to access this information from Department of Work and Pensions. The authorisation form is a simple one-page document and its creation reduces barriers for those young people whose parents are unable to provide the information themselves.

Partnership working is crucial to the success of the streamlined EMA process in West Dunbartonshire. In particular, a good relationship has been developed between the Activity Agreements Co-ordinator and the local Job Centre Plus staff. This has resulted in an arrangement whereby EMA applications with authorisation forms are submitted to a named contact in the local office, who passes the forms directly to the DWP section for completion of the benefits information. The forms are then returned to the contact at Job Centre Plus who contacts the AA Co-ordinator to collect them. This process typically takes 5 days, reducing the time young people have to wait before their application can be processed.

The process is supported by Trusted Professionals who guide the young person and parent through the different stages, starting from the initial meeting. The Activity Agreement Co-ordinator has developed and delivered CPD for the Trusted Professionals on how to complete the EMA and the process involved.

Other elements of the EMA process have also been streamlined, including the use of school records to verify dates of birth where birth certificates cannot be produced.

Impact

West Dunbartonshire's approach to EMA has resulted in a higher number of eligible young people applying for the EMA payment than would have done otherwise, undoubtedly contributing to their ability to complete their Activity Agreement. The less complicated, quicker process has also increased the capacity of the Trusted Professionals and the Activity Agreement Co-ordinator to support young people with other elements of their Activity Agreement.