

MEETING: 20/09/2017

Ref: 13994

ASSESSMENT CATEGORY - Reducing Poverty

Legal Advice Centre (University House)

Adv: Jack Joslin

Base: Tower Hamlets

Amount requested: £132,924

Benefit: Tower Hamlets

Amount recommended: £132,900

The Charity

The Legal Advice Centre (University House) (LAC) is one of the oldest legal advice agencies in London. Founded in 1941 under the umbrella of the University House settlement, the LAC's objects are to relieve poverty by providing legal advice and assistance to needy persons' resident in the East End of London. Today the Centre is based in Roman Road and provides advice work across Tower Hamlets, Newham and South Hackney. Advice is provided by telephone, during drop in sessions and through an appointment system.

The Application

LAC is seeking support to expand its advocacy project to deal with the rise in demand for its services. The charity has experienced a rise in demand from vulnerable clients seeking help with appeals against the stoppage of Employment & Support Allowance, Disability Living Allowance and Personal Independence Payments. To manage this large caseload the charity is looking to employ a full-time Volunteer Coordinator and Caseworker to work directly with clients and manage the network of pro-bono legal advocates. The Caseworker/ Coordinator will need to be a welfare benefit specialist and qualified solicitor with a specific skill-set to work with a range of legal firms while delivering advice to the diverse community and their needs.

The Recommendation

LAC is a well-established legal advice charity in Tower Hamlets and serves a very deprived and diverse community. This project will allow the charity to increase the delivery of its Advocacy project that has seen a huge rise in demand. Funding is sought to employ a Caseworker/ Coordinator on a full-time basis to manage the charity's network of pro-bono legal volunteers while providing expert casework and advice. This project fits well with your programme outcomes for Reducing Poverty as it will allow for more people in Tower Hamlets, Newham and South Hackney to access debt and legal services. Funding is recommended as follows:

£132,900 over three years (3 x £44,300) towards a full-time (35hpw) Volunteer Coordinator and Caseworker to oversee the expansion of the Advocacy programme.

Funding History

Meeting Date	Decision
11/05/2017	After a discussion with your officer, the organisation decided to withdraw its application and will apply under another programme.
13/05/2015	The applicant withdrew the application during the assessment meeting.
18/04/2013	Declined as was a general support service for people with mental ill health and did not address your specific criteria.

Background and detail of proposal

LAC set up the Advocacy Project three years ago as a result of the welfare reforms. The charity saw a large increase in clients requiring support to appeal the stoppage of their benefit payments and an increase in the need for support through the tribunal process. In order to address this need the charity has appointed advocates to undertake case work. Initially the volunteers were law students from Queen Mary University and pro-bono lawyers from the law firm Skadden LLP. In 2016 the project provided advocates in 162 hearings with an 80% success rate. Slaughter and May, Shearman & Sterling, Reed Smith, Ropes & Gray, White & Case and Baker & McKenzie have recently joined the project offering pro-bono support to help cater to the growing need in the area.

Funding is sought to recruit a qualified solicitor and welfare benefits specialist to coordinate the growing service. They will build relationships with the pro-bono lawyers, law students and other voluntary sector partners to ensure that the increased need in referrals is met. The post holder will supervise the appeal cases that are undertaken ensuring that they are progressing and monitoring outcomes. The co-coordinator will also deliver a variety of training to both the legal practices supplying the pro-bono support but also to the voluntary sector partners who refer into the service. Training will cover advocacy, tribunal representation and legal training on disability related benefits.

Financial Information

LAC receives a large grant from the local authority, the Charity's current contract will come to an end in August 2018 but they have been given re-assurance that this will be extended. They also receive a number of donations from the Legal firms that they work with each year allowing them to maintain a good level of unrestricted reserves. They do not list any Cost of Generating funds in their accounts as this is done by the Centre Director on a pro-bono basis outside of working hours. The forecast deficit in the charities restricted fund is due to them completing their transfers between restricted and unrestricted funds at year-end only.

Year end as at 31 March	2016	2017	2018
	Examined Accounts	Forecast	Budget
	£	£	£
Income & expenditure:			
Income	388,912	430,236	419,704
- % of Income confirmed as at 04/07/2017	n/a	%	78%
Expenditure	(358,345)	(387,852)	(420,700)
Total surplus/(deficit)	30,567	42,384	(996)
Split between:			
- Restricted surplus/(deficit)	(6,448)	(64,303)	(68,542)
- Unrestricted surplus/(deficit)	37,015	106,687	67,546
	30,567	42,384	(996)
Cost of Raising Funds	0	0	0
- % of income	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Operating expenditure (unrestricted funds)	28,573	29,856	28,000
Free unrestricted reserves:			
Free unrestricted reserves held at year end	37,015	79,399	78,403
No of months of operating expenditure	15.5	31.9	33.6
Reserves policy target	89,586	96,963	105,175
No of months of operating expenditure	37.6	40.3	45.0
Free reserves over/(under) target	(52,571)	(17,564)	(26,772)