

MEETING: 02/05/2018

Ref: 14543

ASSESSMENT CATEGORY - Reducing Poverty

Release Legal Emergency and Drugs Service Ltd

Adv: Julia Mirkin

Amount requested: £135,750

Base: Islington

Amount recommended: £136,000

**Benefit: Hackney, Westminster
and Waltham Forest**

The Applicant

Release Legal Emergency and Drugs Service Ltd (Release) was founded as a charity in 1967 to provide legal representation to people who use drugs or have a history of misuse or dependence. It is the only organisation in the UK that supports the legal needs of this specific user group, who, according to Release, have experienced a variety of physical, social and emotional issues; and who have equal rights, which should be realised through fair and non-judgmental representation. Release has found that legal issues relating to debt; housing; homelessness or benefits entitlement can act as a distraction to engaging with treatment for problematic drug usage or dependency.

The Application:

Resolution of legal issues can have a positive impact on rehabilitation, stability and recovery for individuals and their families. Release has requested funding for a full-time solicitor to provide housing, debt and welfare advice and representation. Surgeries will be delivered from three sites in Westminster, Waltham Forest and Tower Hamlets.

The Recommendation

The original proposal includes funding for a full-time post that would contribute to the national advice service delivered by Release. This service covers a broader range of issues than those covered by your Reducing Poverty programme, namely, issues relating to criminal, employment or treatment-related legislation. It is recommended, therefore, that the post be funded for 0.8FTE with a contribution to line-management.

£136,000 over three years (£43,500; £45,500; £47,000) for the salary of a 0.8FTE Advice Worker, on-costs; and costs associated with supervision of the post.

Funding History

N/a

Background and detail of proposal

One third of 89 survey respondents at Release reported that they had experienced or perceived, judgement and stigma at external advice agencies. This finding is supported by the report published by the UK Drug Policy Commission in 2010, entitled *Charlie Lloyd, Sinning and Sinned Against: The Stigmatisation of Problem Drug Users* that reported that 'Negative views are common throughout society, including among some of the professionals that work with drug users.'

85% of Release's clients surveyed in 2016 believed that legal advice and representation had had a positive effect on their treatment. This suggests that non-discriminatory legal advice prevents the escalation of legal issues for drug users and supports rather than hinders recovery and rehabilitation.

There are an estimated 52,000 - 67,000 opiate and crack cocaine users in London (Public Health England, *Opiate and crack cocaine use: prevalence estimates for local populations*, 2015). Of those who present for treatment for opiate dependency, 30% have a housing problem (Public Health England, *Better care for people with co-occurring mental health and alcohol/drug use conditions: A guide for commissioners and service providers*, 2017) – they do not collect data on debt or welfare issues. Of those accessing legal services from Release in 2017, 48% presented with housing difficulties (including 14% who were homeless); 62% had benefit problems; and 24% had debt issues. These figures suggest that a high proportion of drug users have legal issues that they find difficult to resolve, facing widespread stigmatisation and prejudice, all of which will have a negative impact on treatment and recovery.

Furthermore, the 2017 report by Public Health England, *Better care for people with co-occurring mental health and alcohol/drug use conditions: A guide for commissioners and service providers*, states that 'in spite of the shared responsibility that NHS and local authority commissioners have to provide treatment, care and support, people with co-occurring conditions are often excluded from services.' This suggests that in addition to the barriers presented by legal issues cited above, the high proportion of drug users who have a dual-diagnosis (70% according to Public Health England), face further barriers to accessing treatment.

The 89 service users surveyed by Release in 2016, presented with a total of 176 issues, averaging 2.1 issues per client. Of those issues, 20% were related to housing, 26% debt, 40% had problems with accessing welfare benefits, and the remaining 14% presented with a range of other issues (this included actions against the police, criminal matters, and family/child matters). At Social Security Tribunals in the last 3 years, Release has had a 100% success rate in just under 150 cases where representation was provided. The national average is 65% for Personal Independence Payment and 68% for Employment and Support Allowance.

Release proposes to deliver three weekly legal clinics, two at drug services in Tower Hamlets, the borough with the highest rate of problematic drug use in the Capital, and in Waltham Forest, a borough with high levels of deprivation and usage. The third clinic will be delivered from a homeless shelter in St. Martin in-the-field, in Westminster, which would represent a new type of partner for Release. 24 people will have appointments with the Advisor across the three clinics each week. Over the duration of the grant, Release aims to provide debt advice and representation to 405 people; housing advice and representation to 600 people and benefits advice and representation to 510 people. In addition, Release aims to support 120 street homeless people to secure stable housing.

Financial Information

Release is operating a full cost recovery model and apports unrestricted overheads to specific restricted funds when its accounts are reconciled at the yearend. These adjustments have been made in the 16-17 in the table below. It is anticipated that once this exercise has been completed, the deficits on unrestricted funds in 17-18 and 18-19 will be eliminated.

In addition to this, a transfer of £60K was made in 16-17 from unrestricted funds to restricted funds, which the applicant advises was an adjustment to compensate for work not correctly attributed in the previous financial year. This impacts on the operational (unrestricted) expenditure figure and the reserves policy target for 2017.

Release's reserves policy target is two months' operating costs in its 2016-17 accounts. However, the Trustees state that they plan to increase this to three months from 2017-18.

Release advises that the 2018-19 budget includes speculative bids for expansion of its legal community welfare service. Until the outcome of these speculative applications is known, a proportion of income and expenditure in 2018-19 remains unconfirmed.

Year end as at 31 March	2017 Independently Examined Accounts £	2018 Forecast £	2019 Budget £
Income & expenditure:			
Income	578,915	599,997	682,600
- % of income confirmed as at 28/3/18	n/a	94.09%	44%
Expenditure	(600,405)	(603,745)	(678,000)
Total surplus/(deficit)	(21,490)	(3,748)	4,600
Split between:			
- Restricted surplus/(deficit)	(5,736)	8,131	90,500
- Unrestricted surplus/(deficit)	(15,754)	(11,879)	(85,900)
	(21,490)	(3,748)	4,600
Cost of Raising Funds	15,909	15,000	15,000
- % of income	2.7%	2.5%	2.2%
Operating expenditure (unrestricted funds)	243,860	325,660	356,000
Free unrestricted reserves:			
Free unrestricted reserves held at year end	85,747	73,868	(12,032)
No of months of operating expenditure	4.2	2.7	(0.4)
Reserves policy target	40,643	81,415	89,000
No of months of operating expenditure	2.0	3.0	3.0
Free reserves over/(under) target	45,104	(7,547)	(101,032)

