

The City Bridge Trust

Bridging Divides: Application for a grant



About your organisation

Organisation Details

Name of your organisation: Free Representation Unit	
If your organisation is part of a larger organisation, what is its name?	
In which London Borough is your organisation based? Camden	
Contact person: Mr David Abbott	Position: Chief Executive
Website: http://www.thefru.org.uk	Social Media Accounts: @FreeRepUnit - twitter
What Quality Marks does your organisation currently hold?	

Legal Status

Legal status of organisation: Registered Charity			
Charity Number: 295952	Company Number:	CIC Number:	Bencom Number:
When was your organisation established? 02/01/1974			
Aims of your organisation: The relief of poverty by providing legal advice and representation before tribunals and courts in the United Kingdom for those who cannot otherwise afford such advice or representation. Assisting in the education and training of law students, pupils, trainees, junior barristers and solicitors through the delivery of the above.			

Main activities of your organisation:

FRU accepts referrals from advice agencies across London and the south east on behalf of their clients who are seeking representation in the social security or employment tribunal. Those cases are made available to volunteer representatives who are, in the main, law students, pupil barristers, junior barristers or trainee solicitors. FRU provides education, supervision and support for the volunteers during the conduct of the case.

Your Staff & Volunteers

Full-time:	Part-time:	Trustee/Board members:	Active volunteers:
6	2	12	400

Do you have a Safeguarding policy? **Yes**

Are the following people in your organisation subject to DBS checks?

Paid Staff No	Volunteers No	Trustees / Management Committee Members No
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Property occupied by your organisation

Is the main property owned, leased or rented by your organisation?	If leased/rented, how long is the outstanding agreement?
Leased	Until 2021

Environmental Impact**What action have you taken in the past year to progress environmentally sustainability principles and practice?**

We have applied for an eco-audit from the City Bridge Trust.

FRU is in the process of implementing a digital upgrade. One of the aims is to decrease our reliance on paper and thus our environmental footprint.

We have a recycling policy and we have recycling bins distributed throughout the office (although confidential papers must be disposed of through confidential waste).

Finance Details

Organisation Finances

	Year of most recent audited / examined accounts	Current financial year forecast	Next financial year budget
End of financial year date	31/03/2017	31/03/2019	
Grants & donations:	£364,048	£330,340	£0
Earned income:	£79,965	£142,902	£0
Other income:	£57	£0	£0
Total income:	444,070	£473,242	£0
Charitable activity costs:	£424,916	£510,543	£0
Cost of raising funds:	£19,450	£2,966	£0
Other costs:	£0	£0	£0
Total expenditure:	£444,366	£513,509	£0
Free unrestricted reserves held at year end:	£126,469	£0	£0

What is your organisation's reserves policy?

It is the policy of the trustees to ensure that the organisation maintains adequate free reserves to meet its charitable obligations while maintaining adequate reserves to allow operations to continue if there is a short term downturn in income or increase in expenditure. The trustees consider that it would take three to six months to identify a material change of this nature and to find the necessary funds or adjust expenditure, and that therefore reserves of at least three months expenditure are necessary. This equates to approximately £125,000.

For your most recent financial year, what % of your income was from statutory sources?
0%

Organisational changes

Describe any significant organisational changes to your structure, financial position or core activities since the date of your most recent accounts.

Reduction in reserves?

We are in the process of undergoing a reform to our governance. FRU will change from an unincorporated association to a limited charitable company. We aim to complete this change by October 2018.

Grant Request

Under which of City Bridge Trust's programmes are you applying?

Advice and Support

Which of the programme outcome(s) does your application aim to achieve?

Advice & Support/More people access debt and legal services for support before they hit crisis point

Advice & Support/More Londoners have improved economic circumstances

Please describe the purpose of your funding request in one sentence.

We want to appoint an assistant legal officer (ALO) for social security who will have the new responsibility of gathering, analysing and disseminating user experiences in a systematic way.

When will the funding be required? **01/01/2019**

Is this request to continue work that is currently funded or has been funded in the last year by:

City Bridge Trust?

No

Another funder? (if so which)

We have been covering the cost of the post in an amended form through the

How much funding are you requesting?

Year 1:
£33,588

Year 2:
£34,239

Year 3:
£34,903

Year 4:
£35,581

Year 5:
£36,272

Total Requested: £174,583

You and your grant request

What, specifically, are you applying for (your project)?

We are applying for funding to appoint an assistant legal officer (ALO) in the social security team. For the last few years FRU has appointed an ALO in the social security team who has the responsibility of supervising volunteers in the preparation of their cases and undertaking cases themselves. Due to funding constraints, the trustees and management committee have decided that we cannot appoint the social security ALO from September 2018 unless specific additional funding is secured.

We think that this is an excellent opportunity to rethink the ALO role. We propose to appoint a new ALO with enhanced duties, specifically the additional duty of gathering data on user experience. They will systematically gather qualitative and quantitative data on user experiences for all FRU social security clients as part of the process to close the case. We will feed this back to policy makers and the tribunals service.

What are the changes you hope to achieve?

We will achieve three changes: (1) improvement in FRU's service; (2) improvement in the process of benefit decision making and appeals; (3) contribution to the evaluation of online justice.

The core of the changes will be the robust data gathered from our clients in the social security tribunal. The data will inform the other aspects of the changes we hope to make. We will use client views to inform our service and to shape policy in the DWP and tribunals service. This is an important time for the tribunals service because of the increased use of online hearings. We hope to work together with the Public Law Project and others to shape the debate on the benefits and risks to access to justice from the use of technology in tribunals. We think that systematically gathered data of user experience through a frontline advocacy agency will be crucial in informing policy.

How do you know there's a need for this work?

Each year FRU receives more referred cases than we can find representatives for. Few organisations can provide representation at tribunal hearings and there is a significant unmet need for advocacy because of the lack of legal aid. A recent report found that in 2017 only 308 disability benefit claimants received legal aid assistance. This means that thousands of people who are incorrectly refused benefits must appeal without legal advice or representation at all. Research has found that having an informed representative can significantly increase the chances of winning the appeal.

We have had an assistant legal officer for several years now. We can only maintain our representation rate if we retain professional legal support for our volunteer advisers.

Recent official reports have identified that HMCTS is not consulting users adequately about proposed reforms and digital developments. FRU is in a position to help users provide systematic objective evidence of impact.

How will the work be delivered - specifically, what will you do?

We will recruit an ALO on a 12 - 18 month contract dependent on the timing of the grant. The role is a valuable career springboard for new lawyers using our training and experience. We expect this aspect to continue. The ALO will be trained by the principal legal officer (PLO) in the social security team so that they can a) represent clients themselves b) support and supervise volunteer advocates and c) systematically gather and analyse evidence about user experience in the tribunal system. We will represent clients at social security tribunals who otherwise would not be able to afford representation. We will use the user experience feedback to inform developments of FRU's service to its clients and we will collaborate with other agencies to monitor the impact of digitisation and modernisation of the tribunal system. Learning will be systematically disseminated to justice system stakeholders.

Why are you the right organisation to do this work?

Very few agencies now provide free representation at social security hearings due to legal aid and other spending cuts. FRU is one of the largest providers of advocacy in the social security tribunal and as we represent hundreds of clients each year we are in a unique position to be able to facilitate feedback on how developments are affecting service users. We have a track record of a) providing quality advocacy in the social security tribunal and b) providing credible evidence-based feedback to policy makers. This means that we are uniquely placed to gather feedback on the benefit decision making to feed back to policy makers. There is no other organisation providing this level of representation in the social security tribunal. We have the largest potential dataset for gathering empirical data.

How does your work complement and not duplicate other services within your area?

FRU is unique in the service it provides in the range and volume of cases it takes on. We complement other social welfare law providers because we specialise in advocacy, only accepting cases referred to us by other referral agencies when they cannot provide representation themselves. We are not a front-line advice agency so we do not duplicate those services, in fact we free up scarce front-line resources so that they can focus on supporting initial welfare benefit claims and in drafting appeals. There is not a similar organisation in London to deliver the work we do and this suggests we are the best organisation to deliver free, legal representation to large numbers of appellants in the social security tribunal. It also means that we are in the best position to gather data on user experiences.

How will this proposal meet the Programme Outcome(s) under which you are applying?

Improved economic circumstances: this work meets the Trust's programme outcomes by securing favourable tribunal decisions for claimants, thus increasing their household income and improving their economic circumstances. Of cases represented in 2016, 70% had the appeal upheld (313). The average gain for each clients is £5,500 per annum, which is a significant sum for those on a low income.

Access to debt and legal services before crisis point: the cessation of benefits, such as housing benefit or employment and support allowance, may precede a crisis in the person's life. Without the receipt of benefits, the person may go into rent arrears or they may not be able to afford food. Timely access to representation in the social security tribunal can secure a victory in the tribunal and thus the person can receive benefits again before the crisis point is reached.

How will you ensure that your project will hear and represent the views and needs of disadvantaged people and/or diverse communities?

1) Representing user's views is the core purpose of FRU's advocacy work: representing disadvantaged people in the social security tribunal so they receive the benefits to which they are entitled. Our volunteers listen to the views and needs of clients and communicate them to the tribunal. 2) We will train the post-holders in facilitating feedback using social research skills. 3) We will gather the views and needs of disadvantaged people through the user feedback conversations to inform the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the benefit decision making process. We will communicate this analysis to policy makers in government, and thus ensure that the DWP/tribunals service works for its users. FRU is a leading organisation and our views are respected by policy makers. For example, the Senior President of Tribunals recently visited FRU's offices to hear about our work and to listen to the experiences of our volunteers and clients.

How does your project engage and empower individuals and/or communities to come together on this issue? Will you be working with people who are particularly excluded?

Our tribunal representation connects two groups of people: disadvantaged people who are claiming benefits and people at the start of their legal career. The service users benefit from the legal advice and representation, whilst the law student gain valuable experience of the social security tribunal. Importantly, the law students gain an insight into the difficulties faced by lay people navigating the legal system and into the difficulties faced by disadvantaged people. Our volunteers often come from non-traditional professional backgrounds and use their FRU work to counter-balance the advantages from more traditional backgrounds.

Our service users are particularly excluded. People in receipt of ESA or PIP will either have long term illness or disability. They are often isolated and excluded from society. These people will have the most difficulties navigating the social security appeal process, which highlights the importance of FRU providing representation and feeding their experiences back to policymakers.

Is the focus of your project meeting an already identifiable need (acute or otherwise) or are there elements which are preventative and/or incorporate early action?

Half of the project focuses on an acute need: the need to win an appeal in the social security tribunal. The service user has lost the right to receive some or all of their benefits. This may lead them to fall into rent arrears, to rely on food banks and ultimately to fall into poverty.

The other half of the project, the gathering of user data, is preventative. Our empirical data on user experience will allow policy makers to take better and earlier decisions on the awarding of benefits and improve the process of appeals which will increase access to justice. Our user evidence will improve outcomes for disadvantaged people.

Who might you need to work closely with in delivering this project - whether before, during or afterwards?

There are four groups with whom we will work closely in this project: (1) FRU's clients; (2) policy makers in DWP and HMCTS; (3) tribunal judiciary; and (4) stakeholder organisations such as the Public Law Project.

The first group is self-explanatory and this is also group who will hope to benefit. The other three groups will be the people to whom we will convey the results of our findings on user experience. An important aspect of our project is that impact of digitisation of the social security and appeals systems. An increasing number of hearings are virtual, but there is very little academic research on the effect of virtual hearings on access to justice. We will work with the Public Law Project and other groups to track the impact on the introduction of virtual tribunal hearings on user experience and justice outcomes.

Our aim as a funder is to help people move positively between any of the four stages of Surviving, Coping, Adapting and Thriving. For your project at which of these stages will most people begin their journey?

FRU's clients mostly begin their journey at the stage of Surviving. Jobseekers Allowance, Housing Benefit or disability benefits are designed to support people who are vulnerable in some sense. If their benefit is stopped for some reason, the person will be thrown into financial turmoil as the receipt of benefits is often a necessity to buy food for their families.

When a FRU volunteer helps to win a case in the social security tribunal for a client, the person will receive benefits again and will move to the stage of coping. The security of a regular payment to them enables our clients to focus on the important steps needed to begin to thrive.

Will there be any elements of this project that will help you or your beneficiaries to reduce your environmental footprint?

The increased digitisation of the tribunal process is designed to reduce travel for physical attendance at tribunal hearings. FRU is also upgrading our technology which will enable our advocates and clients to attend meetings and hearings virtually. We will evaluate these developments to ensure that they promote or maintain access to justice and customer service, and that they don't disempower people. Where virtual attendance works we will encourage it. We have a general policy of seeking to reduce our footprint. We have also applied for an environmental audit from the City Bridge Trust to identify further areas in which we can improve.

What are the main activities or outputs you want to deliver?

The ALO will represent clients themselves in social security hearings.

The ALO will support and supervise volunteer advocates.

The ALO will gather data on user experiences in the social security decision making and appeals system and using FRU and disseminate it to inform policy developments.

What 3 main differences or outcomes do you hope the activities you have described above will achieve?

Increased representation of people in the social security tribunal (increased over the numbers possible without an ALO), and thus more people winning their appeal and maximising their entitlement to social security and therefore more people avoiding poverty.

FRU clients are given a voice to give feedback about the social security decision making and appeal process and their experience of being a FRU client.

Relevant policy developments impacting on particularly excluded people will be better informed by empirical data on user experiences in the social security decision making process and as FRU users

Funding required for the project

What is the total cost of the proposed activity/project?

Expenditure heading	Year 1 (2019 - 20)	Year 2 (2020 - 21)	Year 3 (2021 - 22)	Year 4 (2022 - 23)	Year 5 (2023 - 24)	Total
Casework	18,520	19075	19647	20237	20844	9,8323
Fundraising/PR	2,456	2529	2605	2683	2764	13,217
Premises	94,662	94662	97501	100426	100426	487,677
Office	30,649	31568	32515	33490	34495	162,717
People	244,597	251934	259492	267277	275296	1,298,596
Finance	8,350	8600	8600	8858	8858	43,266
Depreciation	15,663	15,663	15,663	15,663	15,663	78,315
General	1,120	1,120	1,120	1,120	1,120	5,600
Total:	416,017	425,151	437,143	449,754	459,466	2,187,531

What income has already been raised?

Source	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Total
Restricted	43,000	23,000				66,000
Institutional donations	235,300	235,300	235,300	235,300	235,300	1,176,500
Fundraising events	42,200	42,200	42,200	42,200	42,200	211,000
Donations	26,547	26,547	26,547	26,547	26,547	132,735
Charitable objectives income	62,715	62,715	62,715	62,715	62,715	313,575
Other	2,754	2,754	2,754	2,754	2,754	13,770
TOTAL:	412516	392516	369516	369516	369516	1,847,646

What other funders are currently considering the proposal?

Source	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Total
Garfield Weston Foundation	80,000					80,000
Inns of Court and Bar Educational Trust	33,000					33,000
London legal Support Trust	5,000					5,000
TOTAL:	118,000					118,000

How much is requested from the Trust?

Expenditure heading	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Total
Casework						
Fundraising/PR						
Premises						
Office						
People	38,500	33,500	28,500	23,500	18,500	142,500
Finance						
Depreciation						
General						
TOTAL:	38,500	33,500	28,500	23,500	18,500	142,500

Who will benefit?

How many people will directly benefit from the grant per year?

460

In which Greater London borough(s) or areas of London will your beneficiaries live?

London-wide

Does this project specifically target any groups or communities?

This project will specifically work with the following age groups:

This project will specifically work with the following gender groups:

This project will specifically work with the following ethnic groups:

If Other ethnic group, please give details:

This project will specifically work with Deaf and disabled people:

Yes

This project will specifically work with LGBTQI groups:

No

This project will specifically work with other groups or communities:

How will you target the groups/communities you have identified? What is your expertise in providing services for these groups?

We have a diverse network of referral agencies, many of which specialise in particular client groups such as those with disabilities. We have 45 years experience in providing services to these groups.

Are there any groups or communities you think your organisation will find hard to include through this project?

No

If yes, please specify which groups or communities? Where possible using the categories listed above.

If yes, what steps will you take to make your services accessible to and meet the needs of the groups/communities you have identified?

Declaration

I confirm that, to the best of my knowledge, all the information I have provided in this application form is correct. I fully understand that City Bridge Trust has zero tolerance towards fraud and will seek to prosecute and recover funds in every instance.

Please confirm: Yes Full Name: **David Abbott**

Role within **Chief Executive**
Organisation: