

Committee: Funding Committee of the Bridge House Estates Board	Date: 12 June 2023
Subject: Alliance Partnerships – Fight for Sight/Vision Foundation (Ref: 20566)	Public
Report of: Sacha Rose-Smith, Chief Funding Director	For Decision
Report Authors: Sam Grimmett, Funding Director, Matt Robinson, Funding Manager	

Summary

This paper seeks Funding Committee approval of a grant of £500,000 to Fight for Sight/Vision Foundation towards the Vision Fund, a grantmaking programme aimed at reducing isolation and tackling mental health issues within the sight loss community. The funds will be used towards onward grantmaking (£437,575), programme evaluation and running costs (£32,500) and administration (£29,925 – 3%). Onward grant making funds will only be used for grants for work benefiting Londoners. Vision Foundation is also contributing £549,575 towards the Fund (inclusive of admin and running costs).

The funding will allow Vision Foundation to continue to support blind and partially sighted Londoners and the organisations that support them, and will allow them to spend more of their own contribution to the fund on national organisations, by investing in the London (eligible and supportable) applicants. It also complements CBT's Alliance Partnership with Trust for London supporting their Disability Justice Fund which will award onward funds to disabled people's organisations to support their ongoing sustainability across London.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Funding Committee, in discharge of functions for the City Corporation as Trustee of Bridge House Estates and solely in the charity's best interests:

- i) Approve a grant of £500,000 over two years, as an Alliance Partnership, to Fight for Sight/Vision Foundation [charity no: 1111438 (formerly 1074958)] for running costs and onward grant making as part of the Vision Fund. A payment timetable will be drawn up in line with the launch dates of the four funding rounds, and the related payments to onward grant recipients.

Main Report

Background

1. This report seeks support for a recommendation to partner with Vision Foundation (VF), an established funder with an excellent reputation for work focused on transforming the lives of people facing or living with sight loss by funding projects which inform, empower, and include.

2. CBT has engaged in collaborative funding practices for much of its 27-year history – particularly, but not limited to, its support of London’s voluntary and community sector infrastructure. It has widely been agreed across the sector that collaborative funding approaches are required for a thriving civil society and should form a healthy part of the overall funding ecosystem.
3. At the Grants Committee meeting on 6 December 2021, the Committee agreed to earmark up to £15m toward a series of Alliance Partnerships which would advance the mission and vision of the Bridging Divides Strategy. In September 2022, a further £3m was allocated to the initiative by the Committee, bringing the total available allocation to £18m. It was agreed that Alliance Partnerships would be awarded to:
 - a) Established funders, with a track record of delivering grant funding programmes, where the organisation’s primary aim (or primary aim within civil society) is funding.
 - b) For grant programmes which are in development, or recently begun, and which have a finite end point; and for,
 - c) Initiatives which have involved significant scoping/evidence review work, where the funder has specialist knowledge of the funding theme/priority that is additional to CBT’s own reach.
4. The proposal in this report meets the above criteria and, if approved, would see CBT strengthen its commitment to supporting Londoners most impacted by inequality and injustice through a partnership that will multiply the impact of the funding we have available.
5. A table of Alliance Partnerships is included at Appendix 1.

About Fight for Sight/Vision Foundation

6. Fight for Sight and Vision Foundation have recently merged. By combining their strengths and expertise, the organisation will be the only significant national funder with the efficiency, capability, and capacity to increase investment in medical research and social improvement.
7. The staff teams have been combined, and whilst some new roles were created no further significant changes are expected. The new organisation will use the (amended) governing document of Fight for Sight, with Vision Foundation continuing to exist as an entity for the time being, as a subsidiary of Fight for Sight. The organisation will be overseen by a team of twelve trustees (6 from each former board) and co-chaired by each of the former board chairs. It will be led by Fight for Sight CEO Keith Valentine.
8. For the purposes of this paper, VF officers have focused on the team and background, as this is the organisation from which the original proposal had its genesis, and the fund will be administered by Vision Foundation’s Social Impact Team (sitting within the wider merged charity). Due diligence has been undertaken on both organisations where appropriate (for example in relation to safeguarding) or only one where appropriate (for example the governing document of Fight for

Sight was examined for appropriate dissolution clause and objects, as this is the document which will form the basis of governance for the newly merged organisation).

9. Officers are satisfied that the merger represents a genuine joining of forces which will strengthen the impact of both organisations and improve the resilience and capacity of London's sight loss charities.
10. VF has over one hundred years of experience supporting blind and partially sighted people in London to achieve their potential. By partnering with a network of sight loss charities in the heart of some of London's most deprived communities, it helps remove the biggest barriers facing blind and partially sighted people in our society today.
11. During the pandemic, VF moved quickly to help address the problems faced by London's blind and partially sighted people and:
 - a) Committed £100,000 to the London Community Response Fund to support essential community organisations to ensure they could adapt and innovate quickly and effectively.
 - b) Wrote a joint letter with RNIB to the Mayor of London to draw his attention to the challenges faced by visually impaired people.
 - c) Amplified the voices of the sight loss community in London by sharing their stories of life during lockdown through our social media campaign #BlindLockdownLife.
 - d) Supported projects alleviating isolation and loneliness including telephone befriending; community-based dance programme to engage young VI people from the Asian community; 'Music Makers' sessions, for VI children with profound learning difficulties; assistive technology training to older VI people on use of computers, smartphones, e-readers.
12. Since its inception in 1921, it has distributed more than £32 million. In the 2021-2022 financial year, it distributed over £432,000 in grants, a vital resource for several organisations, including those struggling to mitigate the effects of the pandemic. It has been recognised nationally, winning the UK 2020 Directory of Social Change 'Great Giving' Award in acknowledgment of its positive impact on the visual impairment sector, and in particular its capacity building approach. As a funder, VF fills a critical gap for the sight loss sector, which would otherwise have to compete with other organisations and issues, even though they provide vital services to an otherwise largely overlooked population.
13. VF's Board of Trustees and staff team have multiple decades of combined fund and grant management experience. They bring invaluable lived experience at all levels of decision making from Board of Trustees to staff.
14. VF's 'Funder Plus' relationship with its funded partners involves free training on key issues such as fundraising, accessible communications, meaningfully applying lived experience, an annual forum for shared learning and 1-2-1 support as an organisational development offer. It has also recently introduced a Resilience Fund of unrestricted funding in its commitment to support the strengthening of the sight

loss sector. In addition to its grant making, it also invests time and resources on developing complementary campaigns for our thematic areas of focus. Through events and campaigns, we are better able to support and inform the wider sight loss sector as well as influence change, working with and on behalf of visually impaired people on the issues that matter most to them.

15. One of VF's values is to work collaboratively and intelligently with diverse stakeholders. To ensure an evidence-informed application of its strategy, it first commissions research to gain a better understanding of the issues affecting blind and partially sighted people's lives. This enables it to invest in work that results in the greatest impact for blind and partially sighted people.
16. This model of social research, events, dissemination, recommendations and directed funding is now well-established, having been trialled with a focus on employment and more recently refined for its work on domestic violence experienced by blind and partially sighted people. The next thematic area it intends to focus on will be loneliness, isolation, and poor mental health in the visually impaired community through its Strengthening Connections Programme.
17. CBT has a good relationship with Vision Foundation, and worked with the organisation during the pandemic, when it contributed £100,000 to the London Community Response as an aligned funder. Neither Vision Foundation nor Fight for Sight have received funding from CBT previously.

Partnership Proposal – the “Vision Fund”

18. According to research by the Campaign to End Loneliness, sensory loss is one of the key risk factors leading to loneliness. Since the pandemic, there has been an increase of 44% in the number of people who reported feeling lonely. This was exacerbated in the visually impaired with reduced opportunities to socialize, withdrawal of guiding (due to social contact concerns), and the move to home working.
19. Age UK has highlighted the impact of loneliness and isolation on older people with the number of over fifties experiencing loneliness increasing by 49% in the last 10 years. Almost three quarters of London's sight loss community are aged sixty-five and over – that is approximately 150,000 older blind and partially sighted people who are at far greater risk of chronic loneliness than sighted older people. Loneliness is also a critical issue for children and young people.
20. According to the Royal Society for Blind Children, 37% of visually impaired young people aged 11 – 22 disagree with the statement 'I have good friends in my local neighbourhood' and almost a third believe their visual impairment has made it difficult to make friends. Current literature also points to the connection between visual impairment and increased risk of depression. A 2016 study by Thomas Pocklington Trust and partners says that whilst this link exists, falling into depression is more related to visual functioning and the impairment itself, that is, the degree to which blind and partially sighted people can carry out day to day

activities.¹ The report outlines the impact of sight loss on various intersections with mental health, for example age, multiple disabilities, illnesses, or social isolation. It seeks to understand the interplay in the lives of blind and partially sighted people of loneliness, isolation, and mental health.

21. These findings were echoed in a VF survey in 2019, in which 11% of respondents shared that they had had suicidal thoughts as a result of their sight loss. In their 2019 report, the Royal Blind and Mental Health Foundation identify various mental health challenges resulting from sight loss. It highlights the limited access to mental health services for blind and partially sighted people and calls for a more nuanced support to individual needs and respective sight loss journeys.

22. Additional studies highlight the desperate need for a better approach:

- a) 31% of blind and partially sighted people are rarely, or never, optimistic about the future.
- b) Only 17% of people experiencing sight loss are offered emotional support in relation to their deteriorating vision.
- c) More than 4 in 10 people attending low vision clinics are suffering from symptoms of clinical depression.
- d) In a survey by Mental Health Foundation Scotland, 85% of respondents stated that 'sight loss had an impact on their emotional wellbeing'.² In a previous report, "Social Connections and Sight Loss," the Foundation also highlighted sight loss often comes with a diverse range of emotional trauma.
- e) Disability Rights UK data published in March 2023, which uses ONS Census data overlaid with death registration data, has found that disabled men are three times more likely to die by suicide, and disabled women nearly four times more likely, than non-disabled people.

23. Over the last 5 years, VF has invested over £150k in projects, supporting nearly twenty organisations that directly address loneliness, isolation and mental health. Based on its analysis of its grants portfolio and from anecdotal evidence, it has estimated a need for a commitment of at least £750k to research, identify and invest in the most impactful community projects which can act as a "test bed" of the best interventions.

24. The aim of this comprehensive programme of work is to ensure that blind and partially sighted people are included in all aspects of life and can access formal and informal support and friendship. VF will tackle loneliness and poor mental health in the sight loss community through commissioned research, targeted partner funding (the subject of this proposal), awareness events and public campaigning.

25. This proposal recommends a collaboration with VF on the targeted partner funding element of this thematic area of focus. VF will create a ring-fenced Vision Fund pot

¹ Thomas Pocklington Trust, South West London, St. George's Mental Health NHS Trust, South West London Academic, Health and Social Care System (2016) Visual Impairment, Depression and Access to Psychological Therapies

² Emotional support for sight loss | Mental Health Foundation

of £888,000 to continue investing in the critical area of poor mental health, loneliness and isolation among blind and partially sighted people.

26. Funding will be distributed through four rounds over two years during 2023-2025. Co-funding totalling £500,000 from City Bridge Trust will enable VF to concentrate on London based sight loss organisations and other London based specialist organisations seeking to support the 80% of blind and partially sighted people who sometimes, often or always feel lonely, and the 31% who experience severe anxiety or depression as a result of their sight loss (Vision Foundation Survey, 2019).
27. The Fund will be managed by VF's expert Social Impact Team and supported by VF's Advisory Committee made up of five experts with lived experience of sight loss. Standard due diligence has been undertaken and although the recent merger does mean that the wider organisation is now operating nationally, a separate cost centre for CBT funds will be established to ensure that this grant is only used towards the Vision Fund and onward grantmaking to London organisations, alongside all of the usual and expected internal financial procedures and measures. Standard grant terms and conditions will also apply restricting the funding to work that benefits Londoners.
28. The budget below shows that, of the £500,000 grant from CBT over two years, £437,575 will be used for awarding onward grants to blindness and visual impairment charities benefitting Londoners. £32,500 will be used towards promotion and evaluation costs, the costs of paying advisory panel members to participate, and the costs of making the fund accessible to all applicants. £29,925 (3% of the total grant) will be used towards VF's own administrative costs of operating the fund, which is within acceptable parameters within the sector and similar to or less than the management costs paid to other Alliance Partners.

Budget

Description	Vision contribution	CBT cost revised	Overall Total cost	Notes
Grants to organisations	450,000	437,575	887,575	Split over 4 funding rounds
			-	
Campaign / Promotional costs	10,000	-	10,000	VF Contribution
			-	
Monitoring and Evaluation: research, including establishing impact and modelling social value (development of impact framework- including impact report	18,750	18,750	37,500	50% of total cost requested
			-	
Advisory Committee	11,250	11,250	22,500	Grants Advisory Panel made up of 5 Experts by Experience. Fixed fee of £1,500 per Advisor x5 x 3 funding rounds
			-	50% of total cost requested
Accessibility	2,500	2,500	5,000	50% of total cost requested
			-	
	492,500	470,075	962,575	
			-	
Fund management overhead costs	56,707	29,925	86,632	3% of overall cost
			-	
TS	549,207	500,000	1,049,207	

Outcomes

29. Onward grants in the Vision Fund will be awarded to organisations undertaking work which contributes to the following outcomes for blind and partially sighted Londoners:
- a) Improved mental health and wellbeing.
 - b) Increased access to activities (e.g., jobs, sports) reducing loneliness and isolation.
 - c) Improved access to mental health support nuanced to the needs of blind and partially sighted people.
 - d) Increased confidence and ongoing resilience through better connection to their communities.
 - e) Increased independence.
30. The wider programme that the Vision Fund will sit within (the Strengthening Connections Programme) will also contribute to the following outcomes via its research and campaigning and influencing functions:
- a) Contribution to evidence and data on the impact of loneliness and isolation within the visually impaired community.
 - b) Increased capacity to influence policy makers and the public.
 - c) Opportunity to develop and cascade best practice guidance.
 - d) Building a network of grassroots organisations with shared aims.
31. As an established funder distributing around £432,000 in grant funding in 2021/22, and around £300,000 in the previous year, VF has good capacity to manage a grant of £500,000. Additionally, the recent merger can provide access additional resource and capacity if required (although the project has been well planned and there is no indication that additional support will be required).

Timeline and Impact Measurement

32. The fund will launch in September 2023 and will run for two years – including launch, assessment, and award periods. There will be four rounds of funding, each learning from the previous. Some of the funds (see table below in budget section) will be used for research and development which will include the development of an impact model/framework and the production of an impact report. As an Alliance Partnership, this work will also be evaluated as part of CBT's wider measurement of the impact of the Alliance Partnerships programme.

Communications

33. BHE and CoLC communications and media officers will work with VF to align communications and appropriate and commensurate acknowledgment will be ensured in any media, as with all BHE funding.

Financial Information

34. The newly merged Fight for Sight/Vision Foundation derives income from a diverse mix of sources including individual major and regular donors, trading activities, trusts and foundations, corporates, research partners, income from investments,

community fundraising and others. Grants towards research and social impact represent the majority of expenditure, in addition to the costs of fundraising, policy work and core operational costs. The reserves currently held by the newly merged organisation are substantial and held comfortably above the interim target set, which represents 9 months' running costs plus 50% of non-liquid assets.

35. During the assessment, the organisation indicated the reserves policy is due to be reviewed in Autumn 2023 with a likely reduced target. The organisation said the unrestricted reserves holding would be reduced accordingly, through a pattern of deficits to be planned across the medium term in financial forecasting – to spend down the reserves towards the revised policy target and to achieve greater impact through strategic time-limited programmes. In this period of transition, the governance structures, and financial policies of the new organisation, including an agreed reserves policy, are currently being drawn up.

Year end as at 31 March	2022		2023	2024
	Audited Accounts		Draft Results	Headline Budget
	Vision Foundation	Fight for Sight	(Merged Organisation)	(Merged Organisation)
	£	£	£	£
Income & expenditure:				
Income	2,205,654	3,514,000	7,485,000	7,377,000
Expenditure	(2,157,124)	(3,898,000)	(7,143,000)	(7,530,000)
Gains/(losses)	90,312	177,000	(418,000)	0
Surplus/(deficit)	138,842	(207,000)	(76,000)	(153,000)
Reserves:				
Total restricted	2,500	540,000	857,000	857,000
Total unrestricted	2,340,005	7,473,000	9,422,000	9,294,000
Total reserves	2,342,505	8,013,000	10,279,000	10,151,000
Of which: free unrestricted	1,363,921	4,781,000	7,520,000	7,392,000
Reserves policy target	1,500,000	1,984,000	5,600,000	5,891,500
Free reserves over/(under) target	(136,079)	2,797,000	1,920,000	1,500,500

Conclusion

36. The current economic situation is only serving to exacerbate the experiences for blind and partially sighted people. According to a survey this year by Mind, 78% of people surveyed said that the cost-of-living crisis is impacting their mental health, rising to 94% for those with existing mental health problems.

37. Fight for Sight/Vision Foundation exists to serve people with sight loss by saving sight and changing lives through social impact. It directs the funding it raises specifically towards innovation and change and recognises the importance of managing its scale to ensure its impact remains significant. It has been speaking up for blind and partially sighted people by highlighting inequalities such as the disproportionate levels of domestic violence within the sight loss community and the increased numbers of people with sight loss who died of Covid-19, to give two examples. It will now pivot to highlighting the equally disproportionate impact that mental health issues and isolation have on blind and partially sighted people, and Alliance Partnership funding of £500,000 will significantly increase the amount of funding available to London based organisations during the grant funding portion of this work.

38. This initiative provides an excellent opportunity to direct funds to Londoners impacted by visual impairment in a targeted approach as well as an opportunity to learn from this innovative work which utilises experts by experience, as recruited by an organisation which itself has a good representation of people impacted by sight loss within the staff team, senior leadership team, and board.

39. This partnership also contributes to increasing the spread of funding within the Alliance Partnerships programme, which currently only has one other partnership related to disabled people. VF has confirmed it will ensure CBT funds are restricted for the benefit of Londoners.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 - Alliance Partnerships awarded to date

Sam Grimmett

Funding Director

E: sam.grimmett-batt@cityoflondon.gov.uk

Matt Robinson

Funding Manager

E: matt.robinson@cityoflondon.gov.uk

Appendix 1

Alliance Partnerships awarded to date:

Name of org	Amount awarded	Target communities/funded organisations
Rosa	£499,999	Black and minoritized women and girls
GLA	£720,000	Equity infrastructure organisations
JLC	£1,020,000	Young people
USS	£500,000	Community led organisations in Southwark
Trust for London	£2,000,000	Black and minoritized communities
Trust for London	£1,500,000	Disabled people
Comic Relief	£2,069,375	Black and minoritized communities
Smallwood Trust	£864,283	Women and girls
Baring Foundation	£1,500,000	Communities with protected characteristics
LLST	£6,000,000	Legal support for disadvantaged communities
Vision Foundation (if agreed today)	£500,000	Disabled people
	£17,173,657	
Total Available Allocation	£18,000,000	
Remaining budget (subject to this grant being approved)	£826,343	

NB: There is a remaining negotiation underway with Children in Need which will likely utilise the remaining funds.